

“Taught only by reality can reality be changed” *Bertolt Brecht*

## Is it possible that drama in theatre or television can intervene in the changing world or can it merely reflect it?

The poetics of a passive reflective theatre, a theatre where the audience escapes from reality into an entertaining world of illusion, is attributed to Aristotle. This is the dominant form of theatre today, as well as being prevalent in the vast majority of film and television drama. It is drama built around a common structure of start, middle and end – where any questions raised get answered and everyone lives happily ever after (apart from the bad guys who get their just desserts). Aristotle’s philosophy is that the purpose of such drama is to act cathartically, purging the audience of unsettling emotions – the impact is a form of sedation of the audience and consequently preservation of the status quo.

Aristotle was first and foremost a logician. He didn’t invent the naturalist, reflective poetics of theatre; he was an eloquent commentator on it and his descriptions remain relevant to much of what film and theatre provides today. Kenneth Mcleish describes Aristotle’s fundamental beliefs as follows:

“It was axiomatic in Aristotelian thinking that chaos is inferior to order and that there is an orderly, organic progression from one state to another. By implication, everything in the universe and in human imagination has its hierarchy. In Poetics men are superior to women, and both are superior to slaves. “Good” people are superior to “bad” people and the reasons can be defined.”

Aristotle asserted theatre is about the imitation of reality, with the aim of maintaining the status quo by purging the audience of rebellious inclinations. The purpose of this is to maintain the dominance and power of the ruling classes. A theatre which intervenes to destabilise and unsettle a society would have been, and still is today, a most unwelcome prospect for the ruling classes. It is a testament to the power of the poetics of Aristotle that this remains the dominant form of drama even today, although the prime motivation has, since the industrial age and the onset of capitalism, become more economic than political. The capitalist system is dependent on stability and growth, which in turn is dependent on audiences continuing to spend their money without asking difficult questions.

The subtlest form of intervention is seen more often in film than theatre and involves working within the Aristotelian naturalist framework and using the receptive nature of the audience to raise awareness of an issue or to prick their conscience. A good example of this is *The Insider*, by Michael Mann. On the surface the story is very conventional – ordinary man suffers injustice, fights back, faces challenges, wins the day, finds contentment. However, the film raises deeper questions about the power that corporate America holds over the media and leaves these questions unanswered. There is a limit to the impact of the intervention here; the audience may not be rallied into action, but most will leave the cinema with a more questioning attitude of their culture.

The level of intervention can increase as drama makers start to think about form as much as content. In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Norman Jewison engages an audience in a different way, calling on some of Bertolt Brecht’s ideas to create an intervention. In the film version the clearest example of this happens three times during the story. Tevye the father, played by Topol, is involved in a decision about the marriage of three of his daughters, Tzeitel, Model and Chave. On each occasion there is a challenge to his authority, with each decision getting progressively more difficult for him to reconcile. He is faced with a stark choice, does he try to uphold the traditions and beliefs of his Jewish faith, or does he accept the world is changing and put the wishes of his daughter first? Each time Tevye reaches this dilemma Jewison does three things: Firstly he visually shows a great distance between Tevye and his daughter, even though they are stood close together. Secondly Tevye tells the audience directly the pros and cons of the dilemma he faces Thirdly, there is a pause in proceedings before Tevye announces his decision, allowing the audience time to make up its own mind.. The effect of this is to encourage the audience to think about the issue of tradition versus change and take part in the drama.

In *Fiddler on the Roof* Jewison clearly challenges the Aristotelian poetics, deliberately in my view, to keep the audience focused on the issues of the film and not be lost in empathy. He tells the story of the cleansing of Jews from Russia before the revolution in a way that leaves the audience with more questions than answers. This poetic, with an open end, is based on Brecht’s philosophy for theatre, albeit still produced within the framework of the dominant culture.

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It is when drama makers challenge the dominant Aristotelian culture at a fundamental level, and consider theatre within the wider social and cultural environment that intervention comes to the fore. Whether it be Kershaw's alternative theatre, Brecht's epic theatre, Boal's forum theatre or McGrath's working class theatre, the level of intervention, and potential for transformation, increases significantly when the objective moves from passive entertainment to active engagement. As Kershaw puts it:

"They (radical theatre groups) represent a theatre of social engagement, a theatre primarily committed to bringing about actual changes in specific communities"

Brecht's opinion on the role of the theatre leads us right back to the quote in the essay question. Brecht argued that escapism and empathy prevents theatre from having any useful impact on the audience; his "Verfremdung" principle seeks to ensure that the audience remain capable of critical thinking whilst watching a piece of theatre. Whilst never losing sight of the need to entertain an audience, Brecht's plays were written to prevent an audience from escaping into illusion and were designed to question and disrupt the status quo. As Brecht puts it himself:

"...the present world can only be described to present day people if it is described as capable of transformation"

Brecht's notions of intervention and transformation, whilst radical in their intention, still stop short of a call to action and transformation. Although his plays are intended to make an audience think for itself, spectators remain largely passive throughout their theatre experience. This necessarily restricts the amount of intervention likely to be enabled.

Augusto Boal took Brecht's poetics a stage further, and by so doing significantly increased the amount of intervention possible from drama. Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* documents a kind of poetics where the audience becomes very much part of the drama and where preconceived endings are replaced by possibilities. As Boal himself puts it:

"Now, the oppressed people are liberated themselves and, once more, are making the theatre their own. The walls must be torn down. First, the spectator starts acting again: invisible theatre, forum theatre, image theatre, etc. Secondly it is necessary to eliminate the private property of the characters by the individual actors"

Boal is able to demonstrate that this poetics massively enhances the potential for drama to intervene and transform. He writes extensively about the way theatre was used as part of a national literacy campaign in Peru. The example of Invisible theatre given, shows how a powerful intervention can occur when spectators are a part of the action. Within a short period a simple dramatic sketch turned into spontaneous debate on the nature of exploitative wages.

There is not universal acceptance of the impact of this type of theatre. Kershaw argues that criticism of "alternative" theatre is part of the weaponry used by the dominant culture to retain control.

"Mainstream theatre critics and historians generally have failed to recognise the nature and extent of the socio-cultural impact of alternative and community Theatre. Their descriptions are invariably inflected in fairly obvious ways by an ideological animosity which seeks to contain or diminish the achievements of the movement."

In other words, the fact that pillars of the status quo do not recognise the impact of interventionist theatre proves that it does happen. This is a strong argument for the converted, but will not win a debate with sceptics.

There are, however, more powerful examples of the impact drama can have on the reality of people's lives, although these do not tend to get as much publicity as the dominant, Aristotelian productions which are everywhere. A theatre company, Scottish 7:84, put on a play called *Out of Our Heads* in working class institutions around Scotland. The play deals with alcohol abuse and its relationship with domestic violence in Scotland. It portrays a real issue to an audience that would have included many perpetrators and victims. In describing it, John McGrath, founder and director of 7:84, is in no doubt about the impact of the show:

"I don't know what concrete difference it made to men's drinking habits – maybe some, temporary ones – but it certainly made a difference to people's attitudes to the situation of battered women in Scotland, and to the refugees"

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Further “evidence” of the transforming effect drama can have is documented in *Pregonos theatre – a Theatre for Social Change in the South Bronx* by Eva Vasquez. Pregonos is an “alternative” theatre company representing the Puerto Rican community in New York and beyond. Vasquez describes a play, *El abrazo* (The embrace), which is about people’s attitudes in the early days of the AIDS crisis. The play employs many of the theories and techniques of Boal, with the objective of helping the New York Puerto Rican community fight AIDS. And, according to Vasquez, it worked:

“The audience’s emotional response to *El abrazo* is clear proof that it is possible to effect a change in attitudes towards AIDS, and its direct and indirect victims, after participating in the plays. Although the action on the stage is not reality, it does constitute a rehearsal of reality, and it prepares the public to behave in similar fashion. By a spectator taking on the role of an oppressed character and actively participating in the search of alternatives to change a given oppressive situation, the presentational quality of the theatrical experience is transformed into one of concrete action.”

Vasquez goes on to describe this “concrete action” and how it brings about change. Vasquez also includes a quote from the playwright, Luis Rafael Sanchez, which summarises neatly the potential for intervention in drama. In describing Puerto Rican theatre, Sanchez says:

“It is a willingness to transform the future, not as a showcase of what the country could be, but as an examination of its possibilities.”

I believe drama, particularly in theatre and to a lesser extent in film and television, is able to intervene in a changing world. I agree with McGrath’s view in *A Good Night Out*, that all theatre is basically political. Whether drama is used as a tool for change, as proposed by Brecht and Boal, or to resist change, as the dominant Aristotelian poetics do, there is the scope for intervention. The intervention might be on a relatively superficial level, by raising mass audience awareness in a film, or at the other end of the spectrum it might involve the transformation of a community, whether it be the illiterate population in Peru, the working classes in Scotland or disenfranchised Puerto Ricans in New York. And intervention is essential, if theatre, film and television are going to remain anything more useful than a passive, entertaining sedation of the masses.

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