

## PART ONE SECTION 2:

### WHAT WILL I LEARN?

- You will learn about three different practitioners, their ideas for the theatre and some of the techniques they used.
- How to incorporate the practitioner's ideas into your own devised scenes.

### KEY TERMS

**Playwright** – someone who writes plays; a dramatist.

**Practitioner** – someone who practises a technique.

**Director** – a person who supervises the creative aspects of a dramatic production and instructs the actors and crew.

**Marxist ideas** – according to Karl Marx (1818–83), the people of the world are divided into two groups or classes, the working class (i.e. the workers) and the ruling class (i.e. owners of factories, land and buildings). His vision was to see a classless society, where everybody is equal.

## HOW DO I INCORPORATE THE INFLUENCES OF A PRACTITIONER IN MY WORK?

### BRECHT

#### Who was Brecht?

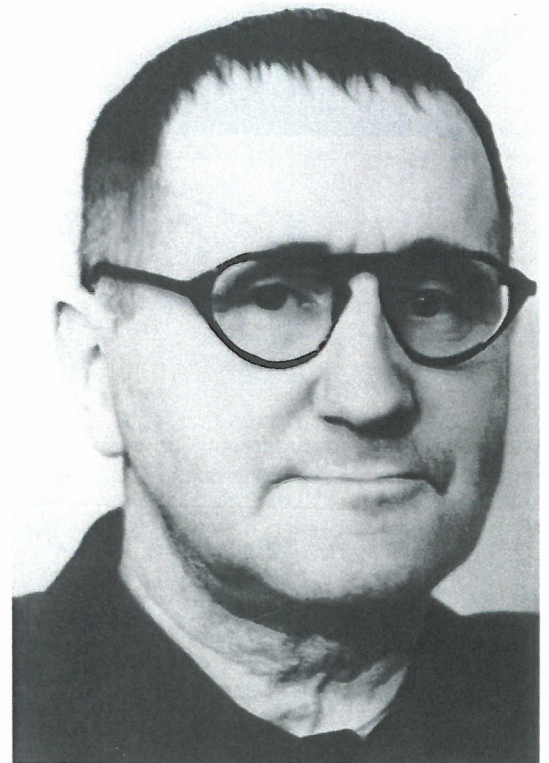
Bertolt Brecht was born in Augsburg, Germany on 19 February 1898. He was a famous **playwright**, theatre critic, **practitioner** and **director**. He became one of the most influential figures in twentieth-century theatre, writing 39 plays. The first one – *Baal* – was written in 1918. His company – the Berliner Ensemble – became one of the most famous touring companies in the world, and to this day continues to produce politically – minded work in the Brechtian style.

Some of his most well-known plays are:

- *Mother Courage and Her Children*
- *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*
- *The Threepenny Opera*
- *The Good Person of Szechwan*

FACT

BRECHT was heavily influenced by **Marxist ideas** and he saw theatre as a way to spread political messages about class struggle.



#### What was his style?

You can sum up Brecht's style in **three** words:

- 1 **Alienation:** Brecht used techniques which would create distance or alienation between the actor and the spectator, so that his audience would be able to respond to the drama objectively and learn from it.
- 2 **Didactic:** This means that he wanted his plays to have an educational purpose. They are designed to educate the performers and audience.
- 3 **Gestic:** This is a theatrical technique that helps define the emotion within a character and the context they are in. It is the combination of a gesture, facial expressions, body language and a social meaning into one movement, stance or vocal display. It is sometimes referred to as the 'social gest', as it is an action that allows the audience to understand something specific about the social circumstances presented on stage.



## What were his ideas for the theatre?

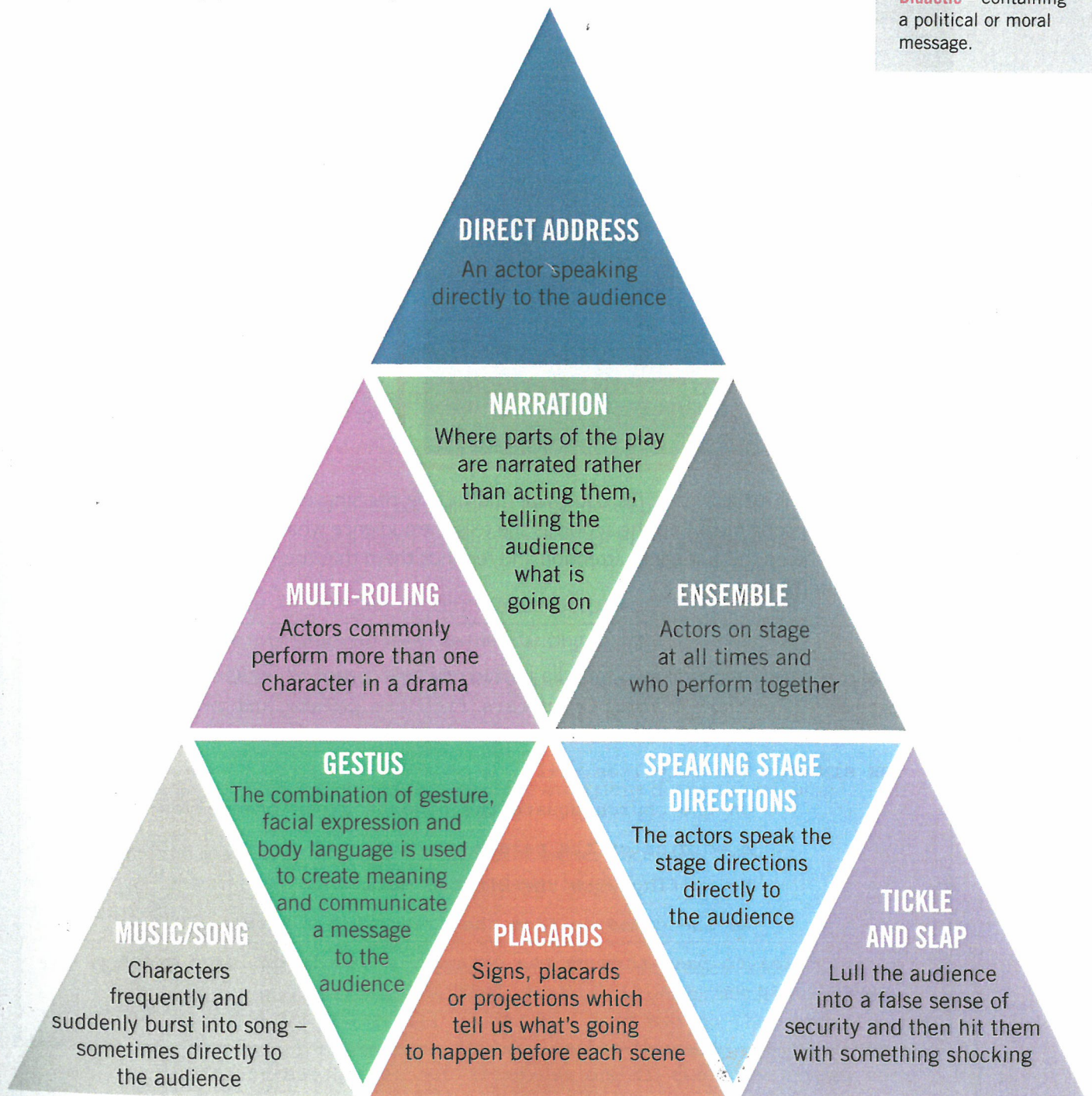
- Brecht wanted to distance his audience from the action, to stop them becoming too emotionally involved with the characters. His plays are often referred to as **Epic theatre**.
- He wanted to disrupt the notion of the **fourth wall**. 'Breaking the fourth wall' involves the characters directly addressing and acknowledging the audience.
- He wanted his audiences to 'think'. He wanted his theatre to show audiences that they should take the position of spectators and learn lessons from it. His plays are **didactic** because they aim to teach the audience or send messages about certain aspects of society, politics or economy.

### KEY TERMS

**Epic theatre** – dramatic form intended to provoke rational thought rather than to create illusion.

**Fourth wall** – the imaginary wall between the audience and the world of the actor.

**Didactic** – containing a political or moral message.





## What techniques did Brecht use?

### Examples of Brecht's techniques



**The Silent Scream** from the play 'Mother Courage' is a good example of 'gestus'. The actress in this picture was Helena Vega and she silently screamed for about two minutes. She looks at the audience and delivers this silent scream. It is not the action alone that makes it gestus, but rather the combination of this action and the social meaning. Mother Courage has just lost her son, but if she makes any sound of recognition towards him she will put her life and the life of her daughter in danger. Now she represents any person who has had to keep quiet to save somebody else. She has been forced into a terrible situation and the audience gets to see this through her gestus of a silent scream.

In this extract from 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle' the Singer takes on the role of **narrator**. Her song breaks up the action as she tells the audience what is going on. This helps to keep the audience's attention and reminds them that they are watching a piece of theatre.

*The Adjutant joins the procession while the rider enters the palace gateway, cursing. A soldier appears from the palace and remains standing in the gateway.*

**THE SINGER** The city lies still.

On the church square the pigeons preen themselves.

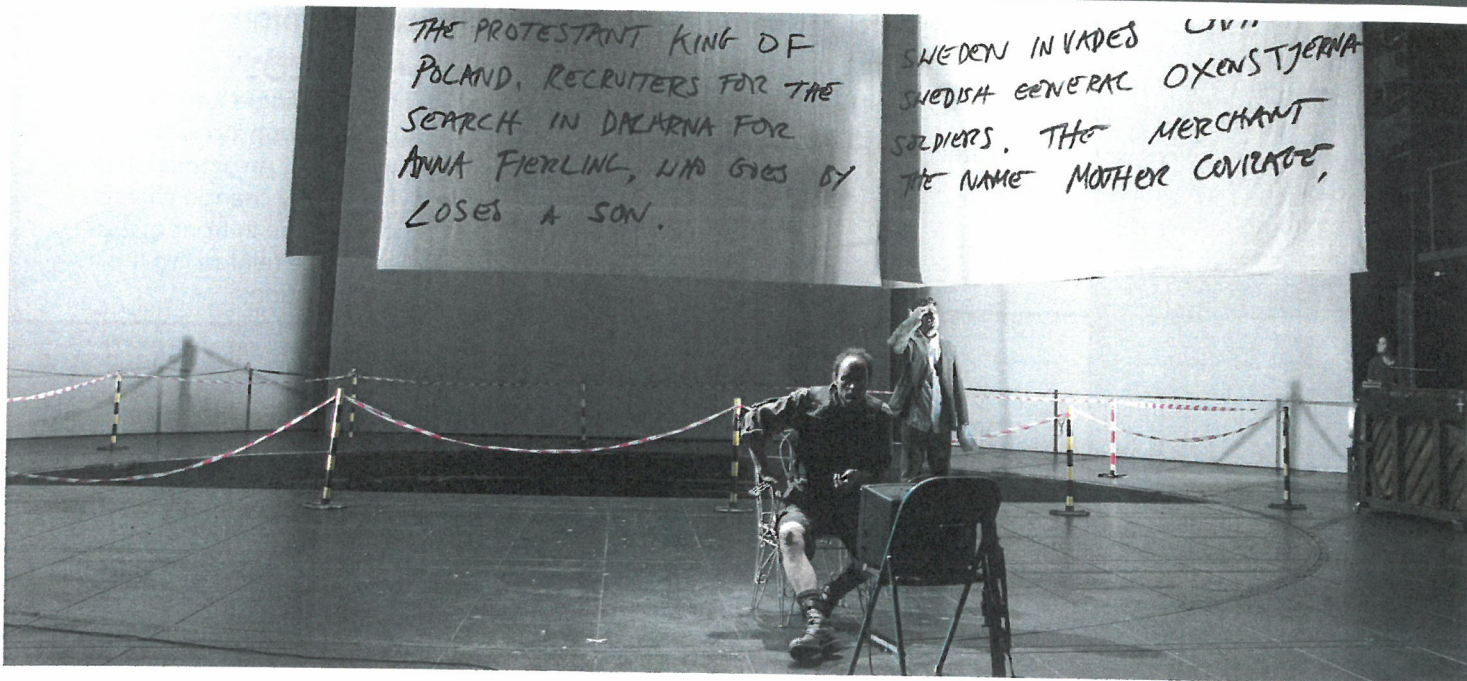
A soldier of the palace guard

Is jesting with the kitchen maid

As she comes up from the river with a bundle.

*A girl tries to pass through the gateway, a bundle of large green leaves under her arm.*





This scene is from a production of *'Mother Courage and her Children'* by Brecht in a translation by Tony Kushner. It was presented at the Olivier Theatre, National Theatre, London in 2009. The image shows the use of two large 'screens' served as high-tech Brechtian placards.

### KEY TERM

**Reported speech** – the report of one actor on the words said or thought by someone else.

### More examples of Brechtian techniques

Brecht made actors turn their lines into third person narrative. Actions given in stage directions are narrated:

'Then X entered. After a few silent compliments he sat down on the sofa.'

Dialogue when spoken in a performance in the present tense, becomes **reported speech**. For example:

'Has your excellency seen the new dancing master?' becomes:

'He asked whether Madame had seen the new dancing-master.'

Brecht would include, in the text spoken in rehearsal, all stage directions. He went so far as to write what he called 'practice scenes'.

This shows how Brecht made use of speaking the **stage directions** during the rehearsal period.

In this extract from the play *'He Who Says Yes'* by Brecht, we see once again the actor who portrays The Teacher directly addressing the audience relating who he is and what he is about to do.

**THE TEACHER** I am the teacher. I keep a school in the city and I have a pupil whose father is dead; he has only his mother to look after him. Now I will go and say good-bye to them, for I shall soon be starting on a journey to the mountains. A terrible disease has broken out among us, and in the city beyond the mountains live several great doctors.

(He knocks at the door) May I come in?



We mustn't forget some of his more technical techniques

### STAGE

Bare stage. All workings could be seen and any changes to scenery are made in full view of the audience. Using fragments of scenery and single pieces of furniture to suggest whole locations.

## Technical techniques

### COSTUMES

Often a single item of clothing or prop was all that was used. An actor would frequently change character or costume in front of the audience reinforcing the idea of alienation.

### LIGHTING

The stage was flooded with bright white light the entire time regardless of whether the scene was summer day or winter evening.

## Getting to grips with Brecht!

This series of exercises should help you further understand some of Brecht's ideas, as he is quite a challenging practitioner to get to grips with.

In one of his essays Brecht refers to a street scene, for example a re-enactment of an accident, as the basic model for epic theatre.

### Activity

This exercise can be done by an individual for the whole class, or pairs for the whole class, or in small groups for each other.

There has been a road accident and as a passer-by you have been a spectator to it.

1. Imagine you are telling the story to a group of people who did not see the accident. Tell the story and include all the characters that were in it.
2. Feel free to impersonate or even caricature them.
3. Try to use gestures, narration, dialogue, third person, descriptions and even token costume and props to bring the story to life.

Brecht said that the actor, in describing the accident, must do what the witness does – SHOW or DEMONSTRATE how the accident occurred.

*'The point is that the demonstrator (actor) acts the behaviour of the driver or victim or both in such a way that the bystanders are able to form an opinion of the accident.'*

(Brecht)





Brecht was a massive fan of the silent film star Charlie Chaplin. He admired the control and the attention to detail in his gestural cinema performances. It's no surprise therefore that Brecht became famous for a particular style of acting called *gestus* (refer to page 21). The combination of gesture and facial expression and body language is deliberately used to create meaning and communicate a message to the audience.

### Activity

1. Stand in pairs at opposite sides of the room.
2. Shout nursery rhymes across the room to each other – all at the same time!
3. Can you really hear? NO! Now you have to rely on the body/gesture to get across the meaning of the rhyme itself. Watch how your movements become bigger.
4. Now it is a matter of life and death importance that the rhyme is communicated. Repeat the exercise and examine use of gesture – how does it convey the importance of the message?
5. What did you do to help convey the meaning when words were limited?



Charlie Chaplin (1889–1977) was an English actor and film-maker who achieved worldwide fame for his silent movies in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His films combined slapstick comedy with pathos, and contained social and political themes.

### Activity

In small groups create contrasting gestic depictions that demonstrate the differences between these two pairs of scenarios:

- School photo last day of term
- School photo just before an important exam
- Crowd at a football match after your team has just scored a goal
- Crowd at a football match after your team has just lost.

At all times Brecht was attempting to distance his actors from their parts, so they wouldn't become too involved. For this reason he used certain rehearsal techniques where he had his actors perform the same scene in many different ways.

To help you understand try this first activity.

### Activity

1. In pairs improvise a scene in which two people (who have not seen each other for ten years) meet at a bus stop. Each actor narrates or reports exactly what they themselves are doing, and puts 'he /she said' before they speak. For instance:

**Actor:** (to the audience) 'He sat on the ground' (the actor sits)

or

**Actor:** (to the audience) 'He said "It's good to see you" (turning to actor 2) It's good to see you.'

2. When ready, introduce thoughts aloud. These thoughts might be in contradiction to the dialogue. For instance:



**Actor:** (pointing at actor 2) 'He hated the sight of him  
(turning to actor 2) How good to see you!'

- b. Try to use **body language** and freeze frames to suggest character and status.

Objective: to make the actor and audience view the character from a critical distance.

### Activity

2. Now read this extract from *Mother Courage and her Children* and follow the instructions below:

**A PEASANT** brought in by the chaplain: My arm's gone.

**THE CHAPLAIN:** Where's that linen?

**MOTHER COURAGE:** I can't give nowt. What with expenses, taxes, loan interest and bribes. *Making guttural noises, Kattrin raises a plank and threatens her mother with it.* You gone plain crazy? Put that plank away or I'll paste you one, you cow. I'm giving nowt, don't want to, got to think of meself. *The Chaplain lifts her off the steps and sets her on the ground, then starts pulling out shirts and tearing them into strips.* My officers' shirts! Half a florin apiece! I'm ruined. *From the house comes the cry of a child in pain.*

**THE PEASANT:** The baby's in there still. *Kattrin dashes in.*

**THE CHAPLAIN** to the woman: Don't move. They'll get it out.

**MOTHER COURAGE:** Stop her, roof may fall in.

**THE CHAPLAIN:** I'm not going back in there.

**MOTHER COURAGE** torn both ways Don't waste my precious linen.

*Kattrin brings a baby out of the ruins.*

- a. Read and perform the script naturalistically.
- b. Read and perform the script in the third person.
- c. Read and perform the script – and read the stage directions.
- d. Read and perform the script explaining what you are doing as the character.
- e. Return to the original script and stage the scene naturalistically again, but this time after delivering/performing each line, walk to the front of the stage and tell the audience WHY the character did/said what they did.

### Activity

3. In groups of four or five devise your own scene using some of my techniques. You could choose four or five of them, e.g. narrator, direct address, multi-roling, placards, music/song. Remember – it should be clear to the audience which technique you are using.



**Exercise**

Now try using Brechtian techniques with the following stimuli:

1. ***'I hope you can find it in your hearts to forgive me.'***

Discuss as a group what could have happened to make this person ask for forgiveness. Decide which one of the group will be the narrator.

The narrator can inform the audience what is going to happen.

- Use placards to introduce each part of the scene.
- Take on different roles.
- Use a song or music.
- Remember gestures and why they are important.

When performing, you can enter the performance space as 'actors', having your costumes hanging on the stage, even doing a warm-up in front of your audience, etc.

As a group, discuss what you think this picture conveys. Look **carefully** at the characters in the picture and create your own story.

Decide which one of the group will be the narrator – the narrator can inform the audience what is going to happen.

- Use placards to introduce different parts within your scene.
- Take on different roles.
- Use a song or music.
- Remember gestures.

When performing, you can enter the performance space as 'actors' by having your costumes hanging on the stage, even doing a warm-up in front of your audience, etc.

**Exercise**

## 2. Visual stimulus

**Exercise**

## 3. What has happened?

The industrialist is having his aeroplane serviced.  
 The priest is wondering what he said about tithes in his sermon eight weeks ago.  
 The generals are putting on civvies and looking like bank clerks.  
 Public officials are getting friendly.  
 The policeman points out the way to the man in the cloth cap.  
 The landlord comes to see whether the water supply is working.  
 The journalists write the word People with capital letters.  
 The singers sing at the opera for nothing.  
 Ships' captains check the food in the crew's galley,  
 Car owners get in beside their chauffeurs.  
 Doctors sue the insurance companies.  
 Scholars show their discoveries and hide their decorations.  
 Farmers deliver potatoes to the barracks.  
 The revolution has won its first battle:  
 That's what has happened.

Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956)

Discuss as a group what political message is conveyed in this poem by Brecht. Decide on the structure of your scene. How will you convey the different ideas presented by Brecht?

Decide which one of the group will be the narrator. The narrator can inform the audience what is going to happen.

- Use placards to introduce different parts within your scene.
- Take on different roles.
- Use a song or music.
- Remember gestures and why they are important.

When performing, you can enter the performance space as 'actors', having your costumes hanging on the stage, even doing a warm-up in front of your audience, etc.



## SECTION 2: WHAT HAVE I LEARNT?

# BRECHT

**WHO WAS  
BRECHT?**

A theatre practitioner  
from Germany

**BRECHT'S  
STYLE**

Alienation  
Didactic  
Gestic

**BRECHT'S IDEAS  
FOR THE THEATRE**

Epic theatre  
No fourth wall  
Didactic plays

**BRECHT'S  
TECHNIQUES**

Direct address  
Narrator  
Multi-roling  
Ensemble  
Gestus  
Speaking stage  
directions  
Music and songs  
Placards  
Tickle & slap

**PLUS!!**

Episodic structure  
Political message

If I want to show Brecht's  
influence on my devised piece I would:

Devise a scene with an episodic structure.  
Pick 'n mix from his techniques, e.g. direct  
address, multi-roling, narration, ensemble  
work, gestus, music/song and use  
of placards.

