

An inquiry into the making of *Bent*¹

“To think, or write, or produce a play also means: to transform society, to transform the state, to subject ideologies to close scrutiny.”

- Brecht, 1931

In order to critically assess and understand the relevance of the play, *Bent*, to a 1981 audience, I will attempt, in the course of this essay, to situate the historical conventions of this play by examining the nature of both Bourgeois and Brechtian theater in terms of theory, practice and response.

I shall begin by outlining the theoretical basis of form and content in Bourgeois theater, following which I will examine the play at some length in order to indicate the type of conventions used by the playwright, their translations into practice, and the response forthcoming from the reviews.



¹ Bent is a 1979 play by Martin Sherman. The first Canadian production of Bent was in Toronto in 1981 at the Bathurst Street Theater; it starred Richard Monette as Max, Brent Carver as Horst and Jeff Wincott as Wolf/Kapo.

I shall then contrast the theatrical conventions used in Bent with conventions of form and content as developed in Brechtian theater. Thus I hope to indicate how the play might have elicited a more politically thoughtful response on the part of the audience and reviewers.

“The Middle-class view of art, which sees in the representation of the immanent, self-sufficient present the real aim, strives to give the stage the character of a self-contained microcosm. This approach also explains the idea of the fictitious “fourth wall,” which is first hinted at by Diderot. Diderot goes so far as to desire that plays should be performed as if no audience were present at all. This marks the beginning of the reign of total illusion in the theater—that displacement of the play-element and the concealment of the fictitious nature of the representation.”²

According to Hauser, these formal conventions allowed for the development of empathy amongst the audience: a response not possible during the period immediately prior to Diderot when the theater was formally “fictionalized” by the presence of the audience on stage with the actors. Hauser goes on to talk about how Bourgeois theater reverses the classical position of man in control of the environment to man controlled by the environment, the consequence being that fate and individual will become the central motivating features of Bourgeois romantic tragedy.

“The Romantics. . . make him (the hero) a kind of superman whose greatness is revealed in the acceptance of fate. The hero of romantic tragedy is still victorious in defeat and overcomes his inimical destiny by making it the pregnant and inevitable solution of the problem with which his life confronts him. . . . The acceptance of the inevitability of fate, the readiness, indeed the joyfulness with which he sacrifices himself, is his victory in defeat, the victory of freedom over necessity. . . . The romantic movement reduces tragic guilt to the wilfulness of the hero, to his mere personal will and mere individual existence in revolt against the primal unity of all being.”³

In addition to clarifying the means whereby Bent exemplifies Hauser’s description of the major characteristics of Bourgeois theater, I would like to briefly

² Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, Vol. 3, p.89

³ *Ibid.*, p.91

analyze certain ideological aspects of the principal characters' attitudes by way of indicating a distinct quality of fatalism in their respective approaches to daily life. But first I shall look at the historical conventions of Bourgeois theater.

Bent illustrates the Bourgeois character of its conventions both in the area of form and of content.

As regards the formal characteristics, the stage directions (darkened theater, spotlights, sound effects, etc.) are all designed to create the illusion that the spectator is, through the medium of the fourth wall, partaking in action in the present.

This, along with the linear narrative (i.e. beginning, middle, resolution and end) creates audience empathy which consists in the fact of the emotional compromise of the spectators. I shall speak further of the irrational effects created on an audience by the deliberate development of empathy later in the paper.

From the point of view of content, it will be necessary to quote one or two passages from the play in order to indicate how the question of the conflict of free-will versus determinism, a specifically bourgeois conflict according to Hauser, is realized in the play.

ACT 2. Scene 3. p. 58

Horst: Come on, didn't you hear? Our barracks had to stand outside all night.

Max: No.

Horst: Yes. We stood at attention all night long. Punishment.

Max: What for?

Horst: Someone in our barracks killed himself.

Max: A moslem?

Horst: Of course not. It doesn't mean anything if a moslem kills himself, but a person who's still a person commits suicide, well . . .it's a kind of defiance, isn't it? They hate that—it's an act of free will.

ACT 2. Scene 5, p.76

Max climbs out of the pit. Max holds Horst's jacket with the pink triangle on it. Puts the jacket on. Max turns and looks at the fence. Max walks into the fence. The fence lights up. It grows brighter and brighter until the light consumes the stage. And blinds the audience.

Max's suicide becomes translated here into an act of free will, the acceptance of his fate, or, to quote Hauser, "the inevitable solution to the problem with which his life confronts him." The principal theme of the play thus becomes Bourgeois in content. The tragic hero overcomes his fate by an act of free will.

I will discuss the question of free will versus determinism, or freedom versus necessity at another point in this paper. At this point, however, I would like to indicate something of the attitudes portrayed by the principal characters vis-a-vis the question of their political attitudes, or lack thereof.

Ideology is defined in the #17 issue of Jump Cut as:

"a relatively systematic body of ideas, attitudes, values, and perceptions, as well as actual modes of thinking (usually unconscious) typical of a given class or group of people in a specific time and place. An example is ruling class ideology in the U.S.A today, often called Bourgeois ideology."⁴

The ideological frame of reference occupied by both Max and Rudy is extremely limited, although probably not untypical given the propaganda machine operating in the Germany of the 1930s. Neither of them have any apparent concern for the political environment in which they live, and how that is affecting, or might in the future affect their lives.

Max and Rudy are at Greta's club after having escaped from the SS. Rudy seems to be more concerned about looking after his plants and continuing his dancing classes than getting out of Berlin. Neither Max nor Rudy have any interest in, or knowledge about, the world outside their own immediate environment.

Act 1, Scene 2, P. 19

Rudy: I want to go home.
Greta: You can't. You can't go anyplace.
Rudy: I have to get my plants.
Greta: Oh, Jesus! Forget your plants. .
You can't go home. . . . You understand?
You have to leave Berlin.

⁴ Jump Cut, Issue#17

Rudy: Why? I live here. I work here.
Greta: No, you don't. You're fired.
Rudy: I don't understand. What did we do? Why should we leave?
Referring to the blond Max picked up in the night club
Max: Who was he?
Greta: He was Karl Ernst's boyfriend.
Max: Who's Karl Ernst?
Greta: What kind of world do you live in? Aren't you guys ever curious about what's going on?
Max: Greta, don't lecture. Who's Karl Ernst?
Greta: Von Helldorf's deputy. You know Von Helldorf?
Max: The head of the storm troopers in Berlin.
Greta: I don't believe it. You've actually heard of someone. Right. Second in command at the SA immediately under Ernst Rohm.

Both Max and Rudy are, to a certain extent, anti-semitic.

Act 1, Scene 1, P.8

Rudy: Rosen's gonna be knocking on our door any minute now, you know that, wanting his rent. We're three weeks overdue. . . . He only cares about money. What's three weeks? He can wait.

Act 2, Scene 5, pp.68-69

Max: No. My landlord. From Berlin. Rosen.
Horst: Oh.
Max: Nice man.
Horst: It thought you hated him.
Max: Sure, I used to think he was what I was supposed to think he was.
Horst: What was that?
Max: A lousy Jew.
Horst: He probably thought you were a lousy queer.
Max: Probably.

Max is particularly enamoured of sado-masochism, a symbolic recreation of the competitive nature of relationships as they develop under capitalism. During Act 11, Scene 4, p.65, when Max and Horst are imagining themselves making love, Max begins to bite Horst's nipple hard.

Horst: . . . I don't want to feel more pain.
Why can't you be gentle.
Max: I am.
Horst: No you're not. You're like them. You're like the Gestapo. You are like the guards. We stopped being gentle. I watched it when we on the outside. People made pain and called it love. I don't want to be like that. You don't make love to hurt.

It's interesting to note here that, apart from the symbolic recreation of master-slave relations through sado-masochism in the play, there are master-slave relations recreated between the prisoners in the camp. This mirroring, among the prisoners, of the class system outside the prison, is the more or less unconscious reaction of the prisoners to a process of identification with the power represented by the Gestapo.

Act 2, Scene 1, p.45

Guard: You.

Max: Yes sir.

Guard: you are responsible.

Max: Yes sir.

Becomes translated between Max and Horst into

Max: Hey- we can't stand here, etc.

Horst: Yes sir.

Max:: You see those

Horst: Yes sir, etc.

In Act 1, scene 6, page 36, the KAPO wearing a green triangle (criminal) discriminates against Horst, wearing a pink triangle (Homosexual), but not against those wearing red triangles (political prisoners) or those wearing the yellow star (Jewish). Horst explains to Max (Act 1, scene 6, P. 39) that the discrimination against the homosexuals in the camp is the work of the prisoners along ideological, and thus along political lines. This, of course, completely does away with any possibility that some form of solidarity might develop amongst the prisoners.

It is, ironically, the love element in the play which serves the purpose of reducing Horst's will to escape from the inhuman conditions of the concentration camp. In Act 2, Scene 3, p. 60 Horst says,

I love you. When I'm not dreaming about rocks, I'm dreaming about you. For the past six weeks, I've dreamed about you. It helps me get up. It helps me make sure my bed is perfectly made so I'm not punished. It helps me eat the stinking food. It helps me put up with the constant fights in the barracks, knowing I'll see you, at least out of the corner of my eyes. In passing it's a reason to live. So I'm glad I'm here.

Horst, however, proves to be the only character in the play who becomes involved, with whatever degree of futility, in taking a defiant stand against the Nazis. He finally refuses to walk into the electric fence and physically attacks the Nazi officer who is tormenting him before he is shot by the guard.

The extent to which the ideologically conditioned naïveté, opportunism, racism, and sexism is evident amongst the characters in this play is the direct measure of their lack of ability to form any solidly defiant position against the inhuman conditions shared by all the prisoners in the camp. It is probably safe to assume that the ideological positions of Max, Rudy, and to a lesser extent, Horst, are reflective of the positions of the majority of the prisoners in the camp. If this were not the case, the prisoners would not have been so solidly effective in their discrimination against the homosexuals. The prisoners are subjugated, divided, and conquered in their minds long before they are arrested and physically abused by the Nazis.

The fact, there is a good likelihood that they would not have been overwhelmingly subject to Nazi brutality had there been a strong element of political solidarity amongst these oppressed groups at the outset of the development of Fascism in Germany.

In fact, there is a good likelihood that they would not have been overwhelmingly subject to Nazi brutality had there been a strong element of political solidarity amongst these oppressed groups at the outset of the development of Fascism in Germany.

At this point I would like to look at the response of the Gay community to the play in order to indicate something of the effect which the play has had on those most immediately concerned with the apparent, although, it seems to me, not the actual subject matter of the play, i.e. homosexual repressions in Fascist Germany.

In a March 8, /81 *Body Politic* review of the play entitled *Bent Under Hitler*, *Bent Under Ackroyd*, (Ackroyd was one of the Toronto police officials responsible for a recent raid on gay steam-baths.) Michael Lynch draws parallel between homosexual

repression in Fascist Germany in 1934 and homosexual repression in Toronto on February 5, '81 when, according to a Feb 6 article in the Toronto Star, "Metro Policemen, many armed with crowbars and hammers, swooped down on four downtown Toronto steam-baths last night and charged 200 men with being found-in at bawdy houses."



Monette, with Brent Carver as Horst, in concentration camp: "Only deprivation leads Max to become himself. Finally he cannot lie anymore . . ."
Courtesy: The Body Politic, April 1981

Indeed, there are parallels between the events in Nazi Germany and those of Toronto, but to judge from the Body Politic review of the play, it seems that the individualistic and subjective response of both Rudy and Max to the Fascist squads of 1934 is recreated in the level of understanding brought to bear on the play by the reviewer, Michael Lynch.

Lynch is correct when he says, “the central issue of Bent is not the actions of the state; rather, it is the personal relationships between Max and Rudy, Max and Horst, between Max and Max himself, given those state produced conditions.”

“ ‘ The whole play,’ says (Richard) Monette, is based on the schizophrenia of denial. Max would rather lie, pretend he’s a Jew, then admit he’s a homosexual . . . Finally, he cannot lie anymore, and in act of free will he chooses to acknowledge who he is. . . . one of the few acts of free will possible in the camps was suicide.”⁵

Lynch goes on to say, “As he (Max) moves from the refusal of intimacy to the acceptance of it, we see more clearly than any documentary could show just how intimacy between males is inevitable opposed to Nazism.”⁶

If this is the case, then perhaps Lynch could explain why Jim Steaklye chose to say in article entitled “Homosexuals and the Third Reich, Body Politic#11, 1974

“Hitler had good reason to be concerned about the reputation of Nazi organizations most of which were based on strict segregation of the sexes. Hitler Youth, for example, was disparagingly referred to as Homo Youth throughout the Third Reich, a characterization which the Nazi leadership vainly struggled to eliminate.”⁷

If the foregoing quote is any indication of the sexual preferences of Nazi youth, then Lynch is sadly mistaken when he implies that intimacy between males is “inevitably opposed to Nazism.” Perhaps he should become more familiar with the history of homosexuality among Fascist youth. In any case, the fact of homosexuality does not, in and of itself, imply any particular political stance on the part of homosexuals. Witness, for example the development in Germany of The Committee of the Special, an incredibly elitist homosexual organization formed in opposition to Magnus Hirschfeld’s Scientific Humanitarian Committee.

Lynch says, in furtherance of his analysis, “we may see Max’s acceptance of intimacy and overt declaration of his sexual identity as his ultimate weapons against Fascism. The personal is political, and Bent

⁵ Michael Lynch, Body Politic, April 1981, No. 72 , pp. 28-29.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Jim Steakley, Body Politic #11, 1974

dramatizes a new urgency for putting on our pink triangles for all the world to see.”⁸

Before I go on to establish the actual the actual historical context from which Sherman developed his play, I would simply like to point out that the response of the reviewer for the gay community itself (i.e. *Body Politic*), predictably focuses on the question of personal (as opposed to social) liberation in the form of Max’s assertion of his free will by committing suicide. This, of course, points back to Hauser’s assertions about the conventions of Bourgeois theater. The personal, as Lynch says, is indeed political, but in this case the politics, both of Max’s decision to kill himself and of the free will theme in the play, are positively reactionary.

Lynch doesn’t seem to be aware of this, probably because he unquestioningly accepts the conditions of the state as “given” and cannot imagine anything other than documentary evidence to clarify the situation. He seems to be particularly enamoured of the dramatic possibilities of the situation, although dramatic means seem to be limited, in Lynch’s frame of reference, to Bourgeois drama.

I have characterized the response on the part of the reviewer as predictable because the theme of the play deals with the politics of personal adjustment to a socially conditioned, politically unacceptable situation. The ultimate logic of the play’s approach requires a reversion to the question of free will versus determinism, or, if you will, freedom versus necessity.

There is, however, another approach hinted at in the *Body Politic* review and this seems to me to be the line of thought that Lynch should have pursued.

(David) “Fernbach . . . argues that we must ask why the Nazis sought to eliminate certain “racial” groups, certain ideological groups, and certain sexual groups, all of which seem very different categories. Fernbach suggests that the Nazi programme was an attempt to restore certain social relations that had already been historically supersede, to turn back history’s clock. “it had to attack the Jews and gypsies because they were international and rejected the arbitrary barriers between states. It had to attack the socialists and communists, who sought to abolish class privilege. And it had to attack gay people, and homosexuality in general,

⁸ Michael Lynch, *Body Politic*, April 1981, No. 72

which puts in question the division between the sexes and threatens male supremacy.”⁹

Ferbach’s position seems to imply that an approach to the social groups under attack in Fascist Germany broader than the purely personal one with which Sherman’s play occupies itself is called for. In other words, Sherman might have done more justice to the history of oppression suffered by homosexuals in Germany had he written a different play.

I would like to say, at this point, that Sherman’s play has served the purpose of righting the repressed history of homosexual oppression in Germany (its is estimated that between a quarter and half million homosexuals died in the concentration camps.) but, it seems to me, at the expense of any serious attempt to draw broader and more necessary political conclusions about the nature of fascism, whether it appears in Germany, Italy, Spain, or North America.

Before I begin to consider the type of play Sherman might have written by way of clarifying our understanding of fascism, and within that context, of the persecution of homosexuals in Germany, I would like to further point out the shortcomings of the free will versus determinism position exemplified by Max in the play.

“Hegel was the first to state correctly the relation between freedom and necessity. To him, freedom is the *appreciation* (my emphasis) of necessity. “Necessity is blind only insofar as it is not understood.” . . . Freedom of the will therefore means nothing but the capacity to make decisions with real knowledge of the subject. Therefore the freer a man’s (*sic*) judgement is in relation (author’s emphasis) is the content of this judgement determined: while the uncertainty, founded on ignorance, different and conflicting possible decisions, *shows by precisely that is not free, that it is controlled by the very object it should itself control.* (my emphasis) Freedom therefore consists in the control over ourselves and over external nature which is founded on knowledge of natural necessity; it is therefore necessarily a product of historical development.”¹⁰

Max’s so-called free will, in the context of the above quote turns out to be nothing but a fatalistic and desperate attempt to abolish his problems, understood on a purely

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Frederick Engels, *Anti-Duhring*, p.124

personal, rather than political level, to the realm of oblivion. Max does not, at any point, recognize that the content of his judgement is socially determined. His choice of suicide in this situation seems purely arbitrary; the acknowledgement of his homosexuality made only with the certain knowledge that death will release him from the social consequences.

How much more hopeful would it have been if Max had chosen to wear Horst's jacket with the pink triangle while bravely and defiantly remaining alive? The Nazis would, no doubt, have executed him, but at least he would not have been seen to indulge himself (and through the implications of empathy, the audience) in this ultimate form of fatalistic masochism. The logic of this theatrical demonstration for the audience is that, if we disagree with what's happening in the political realm, we have the option of exercising our "free" will and killing ourselves rather than becoming politically organized in opposition to Fascism.

I would now like to more clearly situate both fascism and Hitler's persecution of homosexuals in Germany in an historical context:

"...fascism shows that when the need for social security and material well-being is not fulfilled (as they were plainly not being fulfilled in Hitler's Germany), they can be compensated for through the satisfaction of needs of another kind. The feelings of self-esteem among those who were most threatened by the (economic) crisis could be strengthened through the nationalist and racist ideologies which gave every German the feeling of belonging to a special and chosen group. This compensatory mechanism functions extremely well if it projects an inferior human (Untermensch) over which every National Socialist could be demonstrated to be a master, and towards which all dammed up aggressions resulting from frustration could be displaced and released. The essential integrating effect of anti-semitism (and, by extension, of anti-homosexuality) for the fascist movement can be found in this process, as well as in the simplistic friend-enemy pattern which readily provides a guilty party for all evil. Only those who had a real class consciousness of their proletarian situation, those who demanded a real transformation of society . . . and struggled for the universal abolition of repression rather than satisfying individualistic ideological and sadistic needs at the expense of others, were able to withstand the seductive power of this ideology."¹¹

¹¹ Reinhard Kuhnl, Problems of a Theory of German Fascism, in *New German Critique*, p.39

The above quote speaks directly to the massive scale on which the phenomena of scapegoating occurred in the economically depressed Germany of the thirties. Yet another quote from Kuhn explains the possible reasons for the fatalism evident in both Max and Rudy when faced with oppression.

“It should be pointed out, however, that the great mass of the population actually experiences history as fate, and that as a rule they act as the *object* (my emphasis) of events. This role of human beings as historical objects is above all grounded in the alienated position of the wage laborer in the labor process, but it is also mediated through real powerlessness in the sphere of political decision making. It is precisely those events that most deeply affect the existence of the individual that are experienced as fate, not subject to the slightest human influence. This real experience is transformed in consciousness into a concept of history in which alien and incomprehensible powers dominate. It is relatively unimportant if these are identified as God, destiny, accident or the Fuhrer.”¹²

As regards the history of Hitler’s persecution of homosexuals, Jim Steakley’s article, *Homosexuals in the Third Reich*, in *Body Politic* #11, 1974 states,

“The beginning of the Nazi terror against homosexuals was marked by the murder of Ernst Rohm on June 28, 1934, “the Night of the Long Knives.” Rohm was the man who, in 1919, first made Hitler aware of his own political potential, and *the two were close friends for fifteen years* (my emphasis) . . . Hitler needed Rohm’s military skill and could rely on his personal loyalty, but he was ultimately a pragmatist. *As part of a compromise with the Reichswehr (regular army) leadership, whose support he needed to become Fuhrer, Hitler allowed Goring and Himmler to murder Rohm along with dozens of Rohm’s loyal officers.* (my emphasis) For public relations purposes . . . Hitler justified his blatant power play by pointing to Rohm’s homosexuality. Hitler, of course, had known of Rohm’s homosexuality since 1919 . . . Hitler . . . was quite willing to cover up for him for years — until he stood in the way of larger plans.”¹³

Sherman’s play is acknowledgedly based on Steakley’s history of homosexual repression in Germany, yet at no time in the course of the play, nor in the fact sheet which accompanies the script, are we provided with the information that Hitler’s move on homosexual was not precipitated by homosexuality, itself, but by the necessity to

¹² Ibid., p.43

¹³ see above Jim Steakley, *Body Politic*

publicly justify his murder of Ernst RoOhm for reasons that had nothing to do with his homosexuality. Rohm was a threat to Hitler's succession to power as the Fuhrer. Goring and Himmler murdered, along with Rohm, dozens of officers loyal to Rohm, who were presumably not homosexuals. This move allowed them to effectively take control of the 500,000 strong Brownshirt militia formerly under Rohm's control and a direct threat to their military hegemony.

None of the above is meant to imply that Hitler wasn't opposed to homosexuality. He was, but probably, embarrassed by the fact that the Hitler Youth was itself reported to have significant elements of homosexuality amongst its ranks. Hitler was thus not prepared to move on homosexuals until larger considerations overrode his caution.

What might the playwright have done by way of a play whose overall effect would have had more relevance both to the homosexual community and to oppressed groups in general? It is my belief that if Sherman had been prepared to look at Brechtian theater from the point of view of form and content, he might have written a play whose didactic effects would have far surpassed those of the play he did write.

Given the fact of bourgeois sponsors and most likely a bourgeois audience, there is good reason to believe that if he had written a Brechtian play, its commodity value (and social value, if you are the Bourgeois) would have been reduced to the point where it would probably still be sitting in his desk drawer. Be as it may, I think we should look at some of the principal features of Brechtian theater in order to determine whether or not Sherman might have written a more effective play.

Augusto Boal, in a work entitled *Theater of the Oppressed*, lists the main characteristics of Brechtian Theater. Boal chooses to refer to Brecht's formulation of theatrical conventions as Marxist poetics.

The "Epic Form" according to Brecht.¹⁴
(Marxist Poetics)

¹⁴ Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed*, p.95

1. Social being determines thought. (Character-object)
2. Man is alterable, object of the inquiry, and is "in process."
3. Contradictions of economic, social, or political forces impel the dramatic action; the work is based on a structure of these contradictions.
4. It "historicizes" the dramatic action, transforming the spectator into observer, arousing his critical consciousness and capacity for action.
5. Through knowledge, it drives the spectator to action.
6. Reason.
7. The conflict is left unresolved, and the fundamental contradiction emerges with greater clarity.
8. The personal faults that the character may have are never the direct, fundamental cause of the dramatic action.
9. The knowledge acquired reveals the faults of the society.
10. It is narration.
11. Vision of the world.
12. It demands decisions.

While the foregoing list characterizes Brechtian theater from the point of view of content, the following quote indicates the formal differences in stage setting and design characteristic of Brechtian theater.

"Briefly, Brecht's stage is a divided stage, the lower half occupied by stage properties, the upper half consisting either of painted scenery or projections (which, in turn, can either present further pictorial situations. The stage is brightly lighted, and the lighting sources are visible to the public. Brecht's stage continually reminds the public that a presentation is taking place, that they have entered the theater to see something special occur under special circumstances (not a substitute for reality, but a parabolic commentary on reality), his stage, with the various elements of theatrical presentation at its disposal, narrates and comments directly on the events being presented to the public. The elements of theatrical presentation function as autonomous units working separately rather than together, each contributing independently to the presentation and interpretation of the story line to the audience. . ."¹⁵

Now, given the fact that Brechtian theater "historicizes: the dramatic action, Sherman might have created a narrator who would explain the historical circumstances either to the audience directly, or to the "actors" who would then be required to enact the roles of the various characters using their full knowledge of the political relationships existing 1934 Germany.

¹⁵ Sammy K. McLean, "The Bänkelsang and the work of Bertolt Brecht", p.253

The interaction between the various characters, without regard for narration, might allow for a more complete understanding of the political forces operating at the time. It is true, after all, that the total knowledge of all the characters present on the stage at any time far surpasses the knowledge of any one of the actors,

Properly constructed dialogue, sufficiently well informed and developed, along with the use of Brechtian “alienating” devices such as Newspaper headlines, placards, self-contained scenes, and announcements from the stage could have the effect both of correctly situating the characters in their political milieu and of clarifying both for the “actors” and for the non-empathizing audience, the relationship between the personal experiences of the characters and the “abstract” forces which are so often translated into fate or destiny under the aegis of bourgeois theater.

Even given characters as naive, opportunistic, and ill informed as Max and Rudy are, the audience, along with the principal characters might benefit to the extent that they would move through the various scenes of the play and emerge from the theater a much more well informed and, consequently, a much less easily manipulated group of people than they were when they arrived at the theater.

If the combination of form (lighting, placards, self contained scenes, announcements) and content (interaction of “actors” reveals the fact that man is alterable; work is based on the structure of economic, social, or political contradictions; the knowledge acquired reveals, not the immutable “faults” of individuals, but the faults of society, etc.) is sufficiently Brechtian in its effects, then the mesmerizing quality of the fourth wall with its consequent cathartic effect upon the audience, an effect which creates emotionalism, but no understanding, would be destroyed.

In closing I would like to re-emphasize the devastating effect upon the audience’s capacity for reasoned understanding and critical thought which is the principal effect of the empathy created by the fourth wall.

Empathy must be understood as the terrible weapon it really is. Empathy is the most dangerous weapon in the entire arsenal of the theater and

related arts (movies and television). Its mechanism (sometimes insidious) consists in the juxtaposition of two people (one fictitious and another real), two universes, making one of those two people (the real one, the spectator) surrender to the other (fictitious one, the character) the power of making decisions. The man relinquishes his power of decision to the image. But here there is something monstrous, when man chooses, he does so in a real, vital situation, in his own life; when the character chooses (and therefore when he induces man to choose), he does so in a fictitious, unreal situation, lacking all the density of facts, nuances and complications that life offers. This makes man (the real one) choose according to unreal situations and criteria."¹⁶

And, finally, back to the possible response of an imaginary reviewer of a Brechtian play.

I cannot imagine a reviewer of a play constructed along Brechtian lines referring to the question of an act of suicide as an exercise in free will. I believe that the categories such an imaginary reviewer would be dealing with would be much more relevant, not only to a 1981 audience, but to any audience anxious to critically examine the questionable ideology contained in bourgeois theater. Whether they be homosexuals, women, racial minorities or members, tried and true, of the working class which includes in its midst all these categories of oppressed peoples.

¹⁶ Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed*, p.113

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