

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22739-1 - Modern Drama in Theory and Practice: Volume 3: Expressionism and Epic Theatre

J.L.Styan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 *Expressionism in the theatre*

In the view of the art critic Herbert Read, expressionism is 'one of the basic modes of perceiving and representing the world around us'. Asked what he expected of expressionism in the theatre, the ordinary playgoer is likely to be vague. In realism, he might say, actors sit about on chairs and talk about the weather, but in expressionism they stand on them and shout about the world. The reason is not far to seek. Of all the dramatic modes of this century, none has proved more accommodating, but the one element common to all expressionistic plays is a rigorous anti-realism. Expressionism began as a form of windy neo-romanticism and grew to be a hard-headed, dialectical kind of realism. Certainly it is today associated, as it will be in this book, with more than the youthful German drama of the 1910s that gave it birth, and even current epic theatre has retained strong formal links with the very expressionism against which it rebelled. Today, the term is generally applied after the fact, and is often better defined by the play to which it is applied than by the critic who applies it. Nevertheless, in its basic techniques it has been an enduring thread of great strength and vitality in the story of modern drama, binding such giants as Strindberg and O'Neill, Brecht and O'Casey.

The term was first applied to painting. It was thought to have been coined by the French painter Julien-Auguste Hervé in 1901, but John Willett has since found it in use half-a-century before then. In the 1900s it was a useful word to distinguish early impressionist painting from the more energetic individualism of Van Gogh and Matisse, each of whom refused to render exactly what he saw, in order, Van Gogh said, 'to express himself with force'. Where the impressionist tried to paint external reality, the expressionist insisted on conveying his private experience, his inner idea or vision, of what he saw. The expressionist flatly rejected any realistic style as being

Expressionism and epic theatre

2

obvious imitation: he was not interested in objective reality, and he refused to be wedded to surface detail. Beyond this, expressionism in painting had no aesthetic philosophy as had naturalism and symbolism in literature. The new expressionist was defiantly subjective, imposing his own intense, and often eccentric, view of the world on what he painted. In the theatre, such subjectivity can keep an audience critically alert, but if it is too private, the reason may reject it entirely.

As so often, a useful general term is shared by other art forms. 'Expressionism' was soon applied to music, architecture, poetry (typically to imagistic, lyric verse – parts of Eliot's poem 'The Waste Land' might stand as an example) and fiction (we may think of Joyce's *Ulysses* with its 'Nighttown' episode, or the nightmarish stories of Kafka), but it was especially at home with the drama. 'Impressionism' had been a suitable term to apply to the novel where it described a technique which conveyed the author's own selective sense of reality, but it could not be usefully applied to the more objective elements of drama. Now the stage had a term which could identify any play or production that departed from realism and showed life in a highly personal, idiosyncratic manner, the form of the play 'expressing' its content, and it was particularly applicable to the perfervid movement which gripped the German theatre in the 1910s and early 1920s.

Only afterwards were the characteristics of expressionism recognized in forerunners like Büchner, Strindberg and Wedekind, and these were claimed as the new masters. The style spread sporadically through Europe, appearing in the work of the brothers Čapek in Czechoslovakia, Lenormand in France and O'Casey in Ireland. In America, its enthusiastic adoption by O'Neill also encouraged experiments by Rice, Wilder, Williams and Miller. It resulted in a few outstanding German films, among them Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926); both of these films are worth seeing if only for the record of early expressionist styles they preserve. Through the greater skills of Kaiser and Toller, the movement became more disciplined, and it flourished anew with a radical variation in the plays of Bertolt Brecht, whose 'epic' manner in turn touched the quasi-absurdist drama of the Swiss playwrights Frisch and Dürrenmatt. The lively

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22739-1 - Modern Drama in Theory and Practice: Volume 3: Expressionism
and Epic Theatre

J.L.Styan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Expressionism in the theatre*

3

conventions of expressionism have now become part of the stock upon which the contemporary dramatist can draw.

Ideologically, expressionism in the German theatre was at first a drama of protest, reacting against the pre-war authority of the family and community, the rigid lines of the social order and eventually the industrialization of society and the mechanization of life. It was a violent drama of youth against age, freedom against authority. Following Nietzsche, it glorified the individual and idealized the creative personality. On top of this, the advent of Freudian and Jungian psychology in the first quarter of the century constituted a challenge to the playwright to disclose and reproduce his secret and hidden states of mind. Then the impact of the First World War and its mass slaughter of men in the trenches began to undermine the personal and subjective content of the new expressionism, and hastened the introduction of a more sophisticated concern for man



1. *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, Germany, 1919. Film directed by Robert Wiene.

Expressionism and epic theatre

4

and society; at which point, expressionist drama assumed a politically radical and Marxist temper.

An early example of a play which in 1922 caused a furore in the expressionist theatre was Arnolt Bronnen's *Vatermord (Parricide)*, which he had written as early as 1915. In this play, the new rebellion is expressed by having a young man make love to his mother and stab his father. Here was a crude dramatization of Freudian thinking, but, as the author explained, he was not attempting to write what could be *seen*, only what he *felt* – nothing objective, all subjective. Needless to say, that explanation in no way lessened the sensation intended and the shock taken. 'Man screams from the depths of his soul', wrote Hermann Bahr in *Expressionismus* (1916); 'the whole age becomes one single, piercing shriek. Art screams too, into the deep darkness, screams for help, for the spirit' (translated R. S. Furness). Thus in its early stages expressionist drama was a dramatization of the subconscious, a kind of scripted dream, with the consequent loss of character motivation and rational plot development of the well-made play. This loss, however, did not necessarily imply a surrealist formlessness: a play's true, inner unity could be supplied by the single vision of the dreamer himself.

Particular characteristics and techniques became associated with the early expressionist play:

1. *Its atmosphere* was often vividly dreamlike and nightmarish. This mood was aided by shadowy, unrealistic lighting and visual distortions in the set. A characteristic use of pause and silence, carefully placed in counterpoint with speech and held for an abnormal length of time, also contributed to the dream effect.

2. *Settings* avoided reproducing the detail of naturalistic drama, and created only those starkly simplified images the theme of the play called for. The décor was often made up of bizarre shapes and sensational colours.

3. *The plot and structure* of the play tended to be disjointed and broken into episodes, incidents and tableaux, each making a point of its own. Instead of the dramatic conflict of the well-made play, the emphasis was on a sequence of dramatic statements made by the dreamer, usually the author himself. From this structure grew Brecht's epic theatre, also a drama of episodes and demonstrations, although these were arranged to stimulate the intelligence of the

audience, and not to appeal to the emotions as in expressionist drama.

4. *Characters* lost their individuality and were merely identified by nameless designations, like 'The Man', 'The Father', 'The Son', 'The Workman', 'The Engineer', and so on. Such characters were stereotypes and caricatures rather than individual personalities, and represented social groups rather than particular people. In their impersonality, they could appear grotesque and unreal, and the mask was reintroduced to the stage as a 'primary symbol' of the theatre: 'It is unchangeable, inescapable', wrote Yvan Goll; 'it is Fate.'

5. *The dialogue*, unlike conversation, was poetical, febrile, rhapsodic. At one time it might take the form of a long lyrical monologue, and at another, of staccato telegraphese – made up of phrases of one or two words or expletives. The lines made no attempt to obey the laws of Pirandello's 'spoken action', in which the words directed the actor's movement and gesture, but they tried instead to evoke sympathetic feeling directly.

6. *The style of acting* was a deliberate departure from the realism of Stanislavsky. Moreover, in avoiding the detail of human behaviour, a player might appear to be overacting, and adopting the broad, mechanical movements of a puppet. All of this lent a sense of burlesque to the image of life presented on the stage, a quality which was suitable for certain kinds of comedy, like Gogol's *The Inspector General*, but which had soon to be modified for more solemn material.

Paul Kornfeld (1889–1942), the Czech dramatist who later became Reinhardt's *dramaturg*, assumed the role of spokesman for the movement, and the 'Epilogue to the Actor' which in 1913 he appended to his play *Die Verführung* (*The Seduction*), may be read as the manifesto of expressionist acting. Kornfeld coined the term '*Seelendrama*', 'drama of the soul', believing that realistic character psychology was miserably earthbound, and that 'the soul pertained to Heaven'. The actor should therefore play accordingly:

Let him dare to stretch his arms out wide and with a sense of soaring speak as he has never spoken in life; let him not be an imitator or seek his models in a world alien to the actor. In short, let him not be ashamed of the fact that he is acting.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22739-1 - Modern Drama in Theory and Practice: Volume 3: Expressionism and Epic Theatre

J.L.Styan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Expressionism and epic theatre*

6

Let him not deny the theatre or try to feign reality (translated Joseph M. Bernstein).

A real human being was too complicated a creature, had too many memories, Kornfeld argued, to be able to 'externalize' himself; by contrast, the expressionist actor was free to pick out 'the essential attributes of reality', and to be 'nothing but a representative of thought, feeling or fate'.

The actor was not the only one to enjoy a new freedom from the restrictions of realism. Since so much of the subjective impulse behind an expressionist play was left unspoken and unseen, the director and his scenic and lighting designers were afforded opportunities for creative experiment they had not known in the production of realistic drama. A period of unusual flowering in the theatre arts followed in the 1920s, and the German theatre alone produced a unique generation of directors of international standing, among them Reinhardt, Jessner, Piscator, Feuchtwanger, as well as Brecht himself. The ingenuity of these men in turn encouraged an exceptional interchange between playwright and theatre artist in this period.

However, the movement in German expressionist drama as originally conceived died soon after it was born. So idealistic and sentimental a treatment of life could not long survive in a theatre which, since Goethe and Schiller, had traditionally played a serious social role. But certain external elements of expressionism lived on in the work of greater writers who acquired a more purposeful philosophy of the stage. With new discipline in the work of Reinhardt, Piscator and Brecht, the German theatre struggled to become an instrument for social change. Epic theatre, as we shall see, removed the emotional appeal of expressionism, and told a more sober story.

The reversal was felt in Brecht's first play, *Baal* (1918). Although this remained Dionysiac and to a degree poetic, it deliberately undercut the idea of the youthful poet as the martyr among materialists, and appeared to be a parody of Hanns Johst's play *Der Einsame* (*The Lonely One*), written only the year before on the romantic subject of the dissipated nineteenth-century writer Christian Dietrich Grabbe. Brecht's second play, *Trommeln in der Nacht* (*Drums in the Night*, 1922), went even further, and undermined the idealism of revolu-

tion. So it was that the expressionist movement was quickly stripped of its sentimentality and, under a different banner, became the leading anti-romantic force in the modern theatre. If something of the scandalous subject-matter remained, the frenzied, strident tone, the easy mysticism and the almost religious fervour of the early German expressionists were not heard again. In any case, their anti-establishment attitude could not long have withstood the authoritarian rule of the Nazis.

2 *Forerunners of expressionism: Büchner*

Danton's Death (1902), *Woyzeck* (1913)

The German expressionists had not exactly invented a new form of drama, because they were working in the shadow of three great predecessors. Lyrical plays of social criticism, satire and protest which fell well outside the naturalistic movement existed before the 1910s in the work of Büchner, Wedekind and Strindberg. All three had conceived forms of expressionism before its time of fruition, with all three achieving full recognition for their innovations rather late. This is especially true of Büchner, who has in recent years been claimed as a model by a wide variety of playwrights from the surrealistic to the politically realistic and documentary.

Georg Büchner (1813–37) died of typhoid fever at the age of twenty-three, without having seen any of his plays produced, and long before any modern movement in the theatre had been conceived. But his brief years of playwriting anticipated so many techniques of modern expressionism that it has been a commonplace to name him at the first modern playwright. Since the first production of *Dantons Tod* (*Danton's Death*) was not seen until 1902, and that of his masterpiece *Woyzeck* until 1913, it is right to place him squarely at the beginning of the expressionist movement, when his work, like Wedekind's, was fortunate to catch the interest of Max Reinhardt, the German master of the theatre in the early years of the century.

Expressionism and epic theatre

8

The question remains why it took a hundred years for others to follow Büchner's initiative and take up his experiments, and part of the answer lies in the fact that these would have been as startling in the nineteenth century as they were in the twentieth.

In all his playwriting, Büchner tried to find new ways of expressing his fatalistic perception of society and events, and of substantiating his view that 'the individual is no more than foam on a wave'. He was an active reformist and a member of *Das junge Deutschland*, the 'Young Germany' movement, and in 1833 he was the author of an early communist manifesto in *The Hessian Peasants' Messenger*. Moreover, the brutal repressive measures of the authorities left him totally disillusioned. Therefore, for his first literary subject, he chose the unhappy story of the French revolutionary leader, Georges Danton, who became the victim of his own revolution at the hands of Robespierre. Danton, with a disgust like Büchner's own, died recognizing that the people for whom he had fought were little better off than before any blood had been spilled. Büchner wrote *Danton's Death* in five weeks in 1835, when it was published in a cautiously amended version with a subtitle supplied by the publisher, 'Dramatic Pictures from the Reign of Terror'; the original was not published until 1850.

Danton's Death is an amazingly accomplished first play. As the French Revolution fails, so the Reign of Terror succeeds. The 'incorruptible' Robespierre, the apparent pattern of virtue, has become the head of the notorious Committee for Public Safety, which was first created to defend the principles of the Revolution. Robespierre grows viciously puritanical, and orders more and more executions. Danton, who had successfully raised the armies of the Revolution, has become bitter about politics, and his services to the country are forgotten. The opposite of the austere Robespierre, Danton is pictured as a remorseful sensualist sickened by the bloodshed he has witnessed, and wishing that the Revolution could be humanized. He seems to long for oblivion:

I'm making eyes at death. How charming to coquette with her from a distance, through a quizz-glass! (translated Geoffrey Dunlop)

For Danton, political action is futile, and he allows himself to be

denounced, condemned and executed. Neither of the principal characters is without virtue, neither without vice; and so the play ends ambiguously. Its sheer pessimism was no doubt another reason why it did not get a production until the twentieth century.

The ambiguity is managed by generally cutting from Danton to Robespierre and back again, so that the form of the play resembles a debate between those who hold opposite views – we should recognize such a form today as ‘dialectical’. The episodic nature of the play’s construction anticipates the techniques of the cinema, and echoes Shakespeare’s method of swift changes of scene and mood. Act 1, scene 2 in *Danton’s Death*, indeed, seems to borrow from the scene in *Julius Caesar* in which the citizens of Rome attack Cinna the poet, the tone dropping from high rhetoric to street invective as an impersonal crowd torments a ‘Young Man’ who is merely blowing his nose:

VOICES. Look at him! He’s got a handkerchief! That’s an aristo! Up with him –over to the lantern –up!

SECOND CITIZEN. Why can’t he use his fingers? Hang him up!
(*A lantern is let down.*)

YOUNG MAN. Gentlemen!

CITIZEN. ‘Gentlemen’ – what? There aren’t any. You’re the last. Up he goes!

Some sing: Those that rot below the ground
Slowly by the worms are found;
Better far to swing on high
Than a lazy death to die.

In this way the incident is coarsely lyricized by songs which anticipate Brecht’s ballads, and the whole is ingeniously framed by an irrelevant quarrel between a man and his wife, enough to touch in the Parisian atmosphere of common life which continues uninterrupted through the atrocities. Later scenes in street or prison are enriched by the presence of characters chosen to add local colour: a ballad singer, a soldier and his whore, a lady and her gallant, as well as gaolers, carters, grisettes and executioners.

The style of the dialogue does not maintain classical consistency, but ranges boldly from the vernacular to a vigorous cynicism laced with gritty imagery:

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22739-1 - Modern Drama in Theory and Practice: Volume 3: Expressionism and Epic Theatre

J.L.Styan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Expressionism and epic theatre*

10

- Robespierre needs the Revolution for a class-room, to give lectures on morals. The guillotine's his teaching-desk.
- Praying-hassock!
- He'll end by lying on it instead of kneeling.

At the climax of Danton's death, the play bears the marks of the romantic drama which is its literary and historical context, and yet its spirit remains surprisingly modern. At bottom it is dispassionate, and distanced by a tone that Carl Mueller believes to belong to the self-conscious theatre of non-illusion, as when Danton remarks, 'We are always on the stage, even though we are finally stabbed in earnest.' The word for this game with audience current today is 'metatheatre'.

The performance of *Danton's Death* in 1902 was only for a single matinee at the Neue Freie Volksbühne in Berlin, and it did not have a fair test until 1913 in Munich. There the revolve of the Residenz Theater suited the rapid sequence of the play's scenes, and captured the rhythm of the whole. Max Reinhardt's celebrated Berlin productions were at the Deutsches Theater in 1916 and the Grosses Schauspielhaus in 1921, with Ernst Stern as his designer and Alexander Moissi as Danton. Reinhardt's productions were heavy with the use of light and shadow, and his penchant for crowd scenes rather blurred the roles of the protagonists, Danton and Robespierre. Where Büchner's Parisians supply a simple period background, in Reinhardt's hands they became a revolutionary force in themselves, and with actors judiciously placed in the auditorium, the crowds seemed to expand to include the audience itself. No audience objected to such treatment, and Reinhardt's skill as a director ensured that Büchner's reputation as a classic German playwright was permanently established.

Through the 1920s, *Danton's Death* became a popular choice as a play for politically inclined audiences, although the more revolutionary productions smothered Danton's ambiguity in order to enhance Robespierre's arguments. Reinhardt continued to make spectacular use of the French citizenry, and even inserted passages from the more obvious and romantic *Danton* of Romain Rolland. Needless to say, the revolutionary motif was played down in