

Year 9 Knowledge Organiser: BERTOLT BRECHT

WHO

Bertolt Brecht was born in Germany in 1898 and died at the age of 58 in 1956. He is one of the most famous people in the world of theatre. He was a playwright, a director, an actor and developed many ideas and theories about theatre and acting which means he is considered to be a theatre practitioner. His plays are still performed around the world and his theories are still used in the performances of other plays.

WHERE AND WHEN

After serving as a medical orderly in the First World War and appalled by the effects of the war, he went first to Munich and then to Berlin in pursuit of a career in the theatre. That period of his life came to an end in 1933 when the Nazis came to power in Germany. Brecht fled and during this period the Nazis removed his citizenship, so he was a stateless citizen. In 1941 Brecht became resident in the USA but returned to Europe in 1947 after being accused of being anti-American. By the time of his death in 1956, Brecht had established the Berliner Ensemble and was regarded as one of the greatest theatrical practitioners.

WHAT

Brecht made many changes to the theatre of his day. He disagreed with the fact that an audience should be swept along with the emotion of a production. Before Brecht, the theatre of the day would use realistic story lines and high emotion, it would expect the audience to believe in the characters and the situations. Brecht felt that the theatre should be something that made the audience feel more than simple emotion – he wanted it to make the audience think or learn something and to make a change for the better as a result. Brecht disliked the way that the theatre tricked the audience in to thinking that what they were watching on stage was real life. He decided to try to remind the audiences of his productions that they were sitting in a theatre just watching a story being told. Brecht trained his actors to remember that they were not ‘becoming’ the characters but simply presenting the character to the audience.

Key conventions:

Brecht developed the ‘**Verfremdungseffekt**’ which we call the ‘Alienation Effect’, this means that the performers make familiar things strange to the audience, which in turn makes them an active audience who have to think about what they are watching. Examples of how he did this were: Songs – to remind the audience that they are watching a performance and to change the tone or atmosphere.

Spass – fun – making the audience laugh and then making them question why they are finding serious things funny.

Design – The audience were reminded that they were in a theatre watching a performance as the house lights were left on, all of the set was visible from the start and the actors did all of the set changes. Costumes were also changed on stage and the actors played the instruments used for the songs on stage.

Placards – Signs were held up to tell the audience the title of the scene and even what was going to happen in them, this was to take away suspense and emotion and allow the audience to think about the scene instead.

Direct address – The actors speak directly to the audience, sometimes in the form of questions, this reminds the audience that what they are seeing isn’t real and forces them to think about what they are watching. This is called ‘breaking the fourth wall’.

Multi role-play – The actors play more than one part in the performance, changing characters in front of the audience’s eyes and reminding the audience that they are actors and not the characters. This technique also stops the audience from becoming too emotionally involved with the characters.

Representational costume – The actors would simply put on one item of clothing, or an accessory such as a hat or glasses to represent that they were a particular character – they didn’t try to ‘become’ the character.