



Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences

Department of English Language and Literature

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**THE USE OF BRECHTIAN DEVICES IN HOWARD BRENTON'S  
*HITLER DANCES, MAGNIFICENCE AND THE ROMANS IN  
BRITAIN***

Ozan Günay AYGÜN

Master's Thesis

Ankara, 2019



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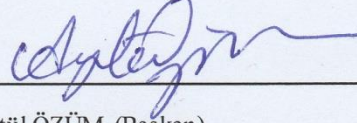
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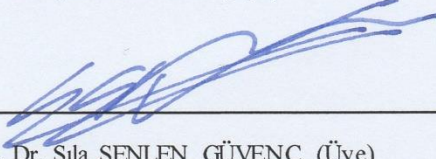
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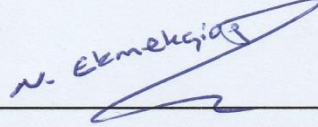
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## YAYIMLAMA VE FİKRİ MÜLKİYET HAKLARI BEYANI

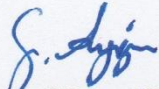
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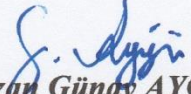
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**Ozan Günday AYGÜN**

*In memory of my aunt Zehra Aygün,*

*who always treated us as one of her own.*

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## ÖZET

Aygün, Ozan Günay. *Howard Brenton'ın Hitler Dances, Magnificence ve The Romans in Britain Başlıklı Oyunlarında Brechtyen Öğelerin Kullanımı*. Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Ankara, 2019.

Bertolt Brecht'in epik tiyatro kuramı yirminci yüzyılın en önemli tiyatro akımlarından birisidir. Brecht, çeşitli yabancılaştırma öğeleriyle oyunlarını Aristotelesçi tiyatronun kathartik etiklerinden uzak tutarak seyircilerinin oyunla duygusal bir bağ kurmasını engelleyip oyuna eleştirel bir açıdan yaklaşımlarını amaçlamıştır. Brecht, bu tarz bir yaklaşımla tiyatroyu sosyal ve siyasi bir tartışma alanına dönüştürmüştür. Brecht'in bu teorileri savaş sonrası döneminin Britanyalı oyun yazarları üzerinde yadsınamaz bir etkiye sahip olmuştur. Bu oyun yazarları ya Brecht'in teorilerini tamamıyla benimseyip büyük ölçekli epik oyunlar üretmiş ya da bir kısım Brechtyen öğeleri kendi stillerine adapte etmişlerdir. Bu Britanyalı politik oyun yazarlarından birisi de politik mesajlarını ve kaygılarını izleyiciye aktarmak için bazı Brechtyen teknikleri oyunlarında yoğun bir şekilde kullanan Howard Brenton'dır. Bu tez, Howard Brenton'ın oyunlarında baskın bir biçimde kullandığı bazı Brechtyen öğeleri kuramsal altyapı ışığında yazarın politik duruşundaki önemlerini de vurgulayarak incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu ön plandaki öğeler, *Hitler Dances*'da (1972) bir aktörün birden fazla rol canlandırması, *Magnificence*'da (1973) Brechtyen karakterizasyon ve episodik yapı, *The Romans in Britain*'da (1980) ise tarihselleştirme. Bunların yanı sıra, oyunlarda kullanılan anlatıcı, seyirciye doğrudan hitap, oyun içinde oyun, müzik, şarkı, sahne tasarımı, sahne donanımı, ışık ve maskeler gibi diğer Brechtyen öğelere de değinilecektir.

### Anahtar Sözcükler

Howard Brenton, *Hitler Dances*, *Magnificence*, *The Romans in Britain*, Bertolt Brecht, epik tiyatro, Brechtyen öğeler, politik tiyatro

## ABSTRACT

Aygün, Ozan Günay. *The Use of Brechtian Devices in Howard Brenton's Hitler Dances, Magnificence and The Romans in Britain*. Master's Thesis, Ankara, 2019.

Bertolt Brecht's theory of epic theatre was one of the most prominent movements of theatre in the twentieth century. By keeping his plays away from the cathartic effects of Aristotelian drama through certain anti-illusory devices, Brecht aimed to prevent his readers'/audiences' emotional attachment to the play and instead led them to approach his plays critically. With such an approach, he made the theatre a place for social and political debate. Brecht's theories have had an undeniable influence on leftist British post-war playwrights. These playwrights either fully adopted his theory in an attempt to produce full-scale epic plays or adapted it partially, incorporating it into their own style by using certain Brechtian devices in their plays. Howard Brenton is among these British political dramatists, as he employed certain Brechtian techniques predominantly in his plays to deliver his political messages and concerns to his reader/audience. This thesis aims to analyse the use of Brechtian devices in Howard Brenton's plays by focusing on predominant epic elements in each of them, namely role-playing in *Hitler Dances* (1972), Brechtian characterisation and episodic structure in *Magnificence* (1973) and historicisation in *The Romans in Britain* (1980) along with other Brechtian devices such as narrator, direct audience address, play within-a-play, music, songs, stage design, props, lighting, and masks in light of the theoretical background and highlighting their significance in conveying the dramatist's political stance.

### Key Words

Howard Brenton, *Hitler Dances*, *Magnificence*, *The Romans in Britain*, Bertolt Brecht, epic theatre, Brechtian devices, political drama

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## INTRODUCTION

Bertolt Brecht's (1898-1956) theory of epic theatre had a worldwide impact in the world of drama. British theatre was also affected by this new movement as Brecht's theories gradually found its way among the British political playwrights, especially after the arrival of the Brecht's theatre company, Berliner Ensemble, in London in 1956. British political playwrights started to use Brechtian techniques in their plays to deliver their intended social and political messages to their readers/audiences. Howard Brenton (1942-) was among these contemporary political playwrights and he too employed Brechtian devices in his plays. This thesis will analyse three of Brenton's plays written between 1972 and 1980 by focusing on the predominant Brechtian devices in each of these plays; namely, role-playing in *Hitler Dances* (1972), Brechtian characterisation and episodic structure in *Magnificence* (1973), and historicisation in *The Romans in Britain* (1980), while illustrating the use of other Brechtian devices in all of these plays as well.

### I. BERTOLT BRECHT AND EPIC THEATRE

With the ideological changes in Europe in the nineteenth and especially twentieth centuries, theatre started to play an increasingly political role. In this respect, "theatre [had] been used, not only by the state, but also by the masses, by revolutionary groups, and by rebels, students, and political parties" (Morgan 6). In the twentieth century, "theatre functioned as a tool for disseminating state ideology and establishing official narratives of history, [...] [y]et this was not successful, for theatre also served as a political tool of groups opposed to the state, as a means of expressing dissent and of stoking the desire for change" (Morgan 6). This politicisation of theatre urged some directors and playwrights to try new methods to deliver the intended political message to the reader/audience.

German theatre director and producer Erwin Piscator (1893-1966) was a pioneering figure in political theatre through the developments he made, especially on the

dramaturgical scale and along with Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) he laid the foundations of the form which he would later coin as “epic theatre.” Martin Esslin summarises Piscator’s approach to theatre as follows:

His aim was a theatre that would be political, technological – and *epic*. By the latter term he meant a drama which would be utterly different from the conventional ‘well-made’ play: a kind of illustrated lecture or newspaper report on a political or social theme, loosely constructed in the shape of a serious *revue*: a sequence of musical numbers, sketches, film, declamation, sometimes linked by one or several narrators. (*Brecht: A Choice* 23)

With these methods and tools Piscator aimed to draw a parallel between the events told in the play and real life situations, and hence urge a direct action towards the real life situation in the audience. This kind of an approach was more direct and propagandist.

The roots of this propagandist approach to the theatre originated in Soviet Russia. After the successful October Revolution in 1917, the Soviet Communist Party set up the Department for Agitation and Propaganda in 1921 to disseminate and impose their ideological tenets among the proletariat through different mediums. The term ‘agitprop’ was used as the shortened name for this department. In essence, agitprop is a “political strategy, in which the techniques of agitation and propaganda are used to influence and mobilize public opinion” (“Agitprop” n. pag.). The adaptation of this strategy into theatre paved the way for a new theatre genre, the agitprop theatre which was an “artistic revolution” that “rewrote the history of performing arts to a great extent” (Raghavan 4).

This changing attitude towards theatre and its politicisation urged significant developments in playwrights’ and directors’ outlook at drama, which in turn led to experimentation. The cathartic, emotional aspects of Aristotelian drama were abandoned for a more didactic and intellectual approach. The so-called fourth wall was attempted to be demolished with several techniques in order to make the previously passive, peeping audience more active. Agitprop performances often included “music, songs, sketches, direct address, and audience participation” (Hillman 385). Due to the limited access of the lower-class Russian citizens to established theatres, agitprop plays were often performed by mobile brigades with minimal props and costumes in the form of short sketches. The audience of these plays were mainly illiterate, thus the plays contained caricatured good and evil characters to convey their writers’ intended

messages in simplified forms to the masses. This theatre movement spread in Germany with Piscator's Proletarisches Theatre in the 1920s, with which Piscator "proved the practical use of the theatre as an instrument for propaganda" and served as a prototype for his imitators which started to produce agitprop works in England in the 1930s with his style (Innes, *Erwin Piscator's* 24).

The agitprop theatre later influenced the "epic theatre" movement, whose foundations would be laid by Erwin Piscator and later developed by his short time collaborator, German theatre practitioner, playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht. Brecht was born in Augsburg into a privileged middle-class family with parents from *Bilgungsbürgertum*, a portion middle class that valued education, and bourgeois backgrounds and had a rather comfortable childhood and schooldays (Rosenhaft 4). Despite this background, Brecht got involved with the Marxist ideology early on in his writing career and reflected this political stance in his works, especially in those related with the theatre. His first plays *Baal*, *Drums in the Night* and *Jungle of the Cities* were produced in the early 1920s. Through these early productions, "Brecht had been catapulted into the top rank of German playwrights," and as the leading critic Herbert Ihering declared he had "changed the literary face of Germany" (Thomson 26). The 1920s revolved around Brecht's politicisation, as he got acquainted, discussed, studied and collaborated with people across Marxist circles and also witnessed events like the Berlin Blood-May, when, from the window of his sociologist friend Fritz Sternberg's apartment, Brecht saw some communist demonstrators were shot by the police during a May Day demonstration in 1929; and according to Sternberg's recollections it was this experience that drove Brecht "ever more strongly towards the Communists," making it a decisive incident in his political biography (Wizisla 5-6). Arguably, his most successful theatrical achievement in these years was his adaptation of John Gay's 1728 play *The Beggar's Opera* as *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), which provided Brecht with a reliable financial support and allowed him to "write and stage the so-called *Lehrstücke* or learning plays, developing a body of performative and theoretical work that would prove crucial to the development of his mature methodology" (Glahn 94). As Brecht's works opposed the political order of the country, they were not much performed until 1932 and eventually the possibility of them to be staged completely diminished in 1933 "when the National Socialists, under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, came to power"

(Spiers 10). The same year, due to the increased restrictions towards his works, Brecht had to leave the country and live in exile for fifteen years in several countries, including Switzerland, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and the United States.

Brecht's years in exile were "a period of financial deprivation, isolation and uncertainty" (Mumford 28). Yet this period of exile also proved to be the timespan in which Brecht vaguely developed his theories on theatre, wrote some of his most successful plays and later devised his plans for establishing a theatre company. As Marga Eddershaw asserts, after his return from exile to Berlin, Brecht attempted to bring together the artists that he had worked with before. The members of the company included "a number of earlier actors: Helene Weigel, obviously, Ernst Busch and Therese Giehse (the latter as guest artist); also the two designers, Caspar Neher and Teo Otto; two composers, Hans Eisler and Paul Dessau; and Erich Engel, the director." Their first production *Mother Courage* at the Deutsches Theater on 11 January 1949 was very well received and on the back of this success Brecht and Weigel paved the way for their own permanent theatre company (34-35), the Berliner Ensemble which was founded in 1949 with Brecht as the artistic director and Helene Weigel as the general manager. The company co-resided in the Deutsches Theater first, and then moved to its intended location, the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, four years later where it still resides now. The founding of the Berliner Ensemble, as David Barnett states, provided Brecht with many advantages, as it offered him stability, many basic facilities for continual practice and research, a creative team, an ensemble of actors to participate in rehearsals with new modes and techniques and thus enabled Brecht to produce "some remarkable changes to the processes of making theatre in a relatively short period" (9). The Berliner Ensemble debuted with a production of *Mr Puntila and His Man Matti* in November 1949 (Glahn 192). With the successful debut and the following productions in Germany and eventually around Europe, the Berliner Ensemble became an influential example for dramatists and playwrights in Europe, including Britain.

It was in the 1920s that Brecht first started to conceive a kind of political theatre that moved away from cathartic, naturalistic and illusionist attitudes. Brecht saw these aspects of theatre as part of the bourgeois culture. Sartre claims that the bourgeoisie had been controlling the theatre for 150 years as it wants a subjective representation of itself

produced in theatres. It controls the theatre through the price of properties belonging to them, especially the buildings in city centres which include theatres; they also control it by the price of tickets, and through critics (47-49). Bourgeois theatre showed the events happening on stage as normal, pacified the audience and persuaded them that the social structure and *status quo* was unchangeable. Brecht despised the theatrical understanding that was following this ideal either willingly or unwillingly. This can be stated as one of the reasons why he scorned the Stanislavsky Method, an acting method that was developed by Russian theatre practitioner Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938). The method acting approach Stanislavski used drew heavily upon psychology, urged the actor to put her or himself in the place of the character that was portrayed, and aimed at creating life-like characters and plays. While Brecht was not wholly against Stanislavski's method of acting, he was strictly against some features and aspects that came to be associated with Stanislavski's plays, such as naturalism and empathy (Bentley 37-38). For Brecht Stanislavski's system "was a nineteenth century relic, hopelessly outmoded, [quoting Esslin,] 'un-Marxist, and reactionary'" (Grange 147).

Brecht insisted upon the need for a more objective and rational theatre that suited with the scientific age that was dawning. He introduced the modern re-evaluation of the term epic in his essay "The Epic Theatre and Its Difficulties" in 1927 as an alternative to naturalist and Aristotelian drama and to define the "new staging methods for the new types of plays he and Erwin Piscator had been staging in Berlin since about 1920" (Knotts 15). He later expanded upon this idea with many subsequent theoretical writings. Brecht had many different sources for his dramatic theory. Martin Esslin lists "the Elizabethan, the Chinese, Japanese, and Indian theatre, the use of the chorus in Greek tragedy, the techniques of clowns and fair-ground entertainers, the Austrian and Bavarian folk-play" as some of the conventions and traditions that Brecht was indebted to (*Brecht: A Choice* 107). Apart from these, there were also several contemporary figures and movements that influenced Brecht such as "the political theatre of Erwin Piscator and German agitprop; the cabaret of Frank Wedekind and the work of the music hall comedian Karl Valentin; Charlie Chaplin and American silent film" and the revolutionary Soviet theatre of Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940) and Alexander Tairov (1885-1950) (Brooker, "Key Words" 211).



The main driving force behind Brecht's theory was his Marxist political ideology. Brecht's musical collaborator Hanns Eisler reflects how Brecht was influenced by Marxist ideology and applied it in his works: "The significant thing about Brecht is that he *consciously* applied the method of Marx and Engels to an area where it had not yet been applied, namely to the theatre and to poetry — the method in fact of dialectical materialism" (qtd. in Brooker, *Bertolt Brecht* 4). By referring to Marx's principle, Brecht claimed that "it was not just a matter of interpreting the world but of changing it, and apply that to the theatre" (*Brecht on Theatre: The Development* 248). Hence, Brecht wanted his theatre to create social and political changes and saw theatre as a medium for instigating such change. Piscator had already laid the foundations for such political theatre in Germany and Brecht acknowledges Piscator's contribution to epic theatre claiming that "the theatre's conversion to politics was Piscator's achievement, without which the Augsburger's theatre [Brecht referred to himself as Augsburger in this work] would hardly be conceivable" (Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues* 69). Brecht thought that theatre inherently had to be an act of entertainment; yet, it also contained a great didactic capacity for inducing political action in the audience. In his article "The Theatre of Instruction," Brecht argues that theatre "remains theatre even when it is theatre for instruction, and to the extent that it is good theatre, it will amuse" (*Brecht on Theatre* 113). Thus, for Brecht, amusement of the audience is an intrinsic part of the theatre and an essential aspect of a good play, yet this does not mean that the theatre could not also be used for political means. Brecht was "after participation and engagement—in and about a new world order. He wanted his theatre to be politically engaged, economically viable, and aesthetically 'entertaining'" (Martin and Bial 2). Hence, Brecht devised many devices that separated his theatre from the classical Aristotelian theatre, where the only aim is to create an emotional catharsis over a passive audience.

Brecht's most problematic notion in theatre is probably the *Verfremdung*, which is one of the terms that is prone to misunderstanding and mistranslation as its translations such as alienation, distanciation and defamiliarisation do not yield the same effect the word has in German and in addition bring with them some misleading connotations (Silberman, Giles and Kuhn 4-5). *Verfremdung* "estranges an incident or character simply by taking from the incident or character what is self-evident, familiar, obvious in

order to produce wonder or curiosity” (Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre* 143). It “refers to two related effects: the inhibition of emotional identification, and the opening of a fresh perspective on aspects of life that tend to be protected from critical examination by our over-familiarity with them” (Spiers 43). However, for the sake of convenience, the abbreviation “A-effect” will be used instead of *Verfremdungseffekt* (*V-Effekt*) in this thesis when referring to Brecht’s ideas and devices which were employed to prevent audiences’ empathic attachment with the characters and actions in plays and keep their critical faculties alive by constantly reminding them what they watch and participate in is not real and just a demonstration. For Brecht, “theatre was an occasion for rational thought, not emotional catharsis” (Martin and Bial 2). This was one of the main departing points of Brechtian theatre from Piscator’s. Brecht was bound to the Marxist dialectic notion that the world and social strata was not stationary but changeable. One of the main aims in his plays through the A-effect was to reveal real incidents and problems from people’s lives in a way that the audience approached them critically, saw their options and acted accordingly after they left the theatre. Brecht described the “learning process produced by *Verfremdung* as a dialectical, ‘triadic’ progression, moving from ‘understanding’ (in a false, habitual manner), through ‘non-understanding’ (because of the de-familiarising presentation), and back to ‘understanding’ (in a new way)” (Spiers 43). Brecht’s A-Effect “required a double dialectic – firstly between the actor and their character, secondly between the actor and the spectator” (Chinna 95). Gregory Mason claims that Brecht wanted to maintain “an aesthetic distance between the stage and the audience; he strove to provoke the audience to rational reflection, rather than to draw it into emotional involvement.” Contrary to Piscator’s approach which could be labelled as “theatre as revolution” that furthered audience involvement through documents and urged direct action, Brecht’s approach was “theatre as theatre, with less immediate agitational goals” (267). Moreover, Brecht does not offer a direct path of action or conclusion, but rather wants the audience to draw their own conclusions.

As it helped the audience’s emotional attachment to the plays and was in complete contrast with the idea of *Verfremdung*, Brecht completely rejected the Wagnerian notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which translates as “total work of art” and asserts that all aspects of a work of art such as text, acting, décor and music should be equally weighted, work

in unison and complement each other for a common purpose. In his essay, “Notes on the Opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*,” Brecht claimed that the amalgamation born out of *Gesamtkunstwerk* was a muddle and the fusing art forms together would degrade all of the individual elements to the same degree, “so that each one can only be a cue for the other. The smelting process takes hold of the spectator, who is also melted down and represents a passive (suffering) part of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*” (*Brecht on Theatre* 66). In contrast, Brecht indicated that all of these features had to “mutually make each other appear strange” (Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice* 134). In the same article, Brecht asserted that “[m]usic, words and set design had to be made more independent of one another” (sic) (*Brecht on Theatre* 66). This would help in destroying the stage illusion and in doing so, the audience would not be gulled and paralysed by a complete act as each aspect of the play would stand out in an estranged way to be critically observed and evaluated by the audience. Brecht would achieve this effect by using these elements in scenes in a contradictory way. For instance, in an act of anger or sadness, a contradictory jolly music would play.

Brecht did not want the stage props and their preparation to be concealed from the audience as they would serve to create an illusion of reality. Instead, he urged the placement of spotlights and musical instruments on stage where the audience could see them. The curtains were not used as effective tools of illusion in Brechtian drama as they were used in Aristotelian drama, but quite the opposite as they revealed most of the stage in preparation and also served as a place to project the titles of the scenes (Esslin *Brecht: A Choice* 121-22). Julian H. Wulbern lists dramaturgical elements that are used for the sake of A-effect in Brechtian plays as follows:

[T]he brilliant flat white lighting which reveals the stagy falseness of the set, the operation of the stage turntable to skew the spectators’ view of the action during a scene, the elimination of spotlights and footlights, and even the exposure of floodlighting fixtures. (71)

Hence, Brechtian theatre provides an always illuminated stage to appeal to the audience’s critical judgments which is in contrast with the naturalist theatre where lighting is changed to reflect the mood of the action in an attempt to increase audience’s emotional attachment to the play. Yet, Stephen Unwin points out that considering “Brecht’s rejection of naturalism meant that his productions were abstract or void of

human detail” is a common mistake. Instead, the elements in his stagecraft were also subject to be changed either literally “by the actors and technicians” or metaphorically “by history and social change” (66).

The idea that both incidents and behaviours reflected on stage by the actors were capable of being changed was of utmost importance to Brecht, since most of his theories aimed to accomplish a sense of agency in the audience. His goal was to provoke many different questions and perspectives on the audiences’ minds, yet he never kept entertainment or emotion out of theatre. At the beginning of his treatise for epic theatre, the “Short Organon for the Theatre” Brecht proclaims “giving pleasure” as the most general and “noblest function that we have found for ‘theatre’” (*Brecht on Theatre* 230). In a previous essay, “Epic Theatre and Its Difficulties,” Brecht had reflected the same sentiments when he laid out the principles of epic theatre: “The key thing about epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the spectator’s emotions than to their reason. The spectator is not supposed to share in the experiences of characters but to question them, dispute them. At the same time it would be quite wrong to try to deny the role of emotion in this kind of theatre” (*Brecht on Theatre* 39). Furthermore, Brecht compares the different intended outlooks of the spectators of dramatic theatre and epic theatre in the article “Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction”:

*The dramatic theatre’s spectator says:*

Yes, I have felt like that too. – Just like me. – It’s only natural. – It’ll never change.  
– This person’s suffering shocks me, because there is no way out. – That’s great art: everything is self-evident – I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.

*The epic theatre’s spectator says:*

I’d never have thought so. – That’s not the way. – That’s extraordinary, hardly believable. – It’s got to stop – This person’s suffering shocks me, because there might be a way out. – That’s great art: nothing is self-evident. – I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh. (*Brecht on Theatre* 111-12)

Hence, Brechtian drama treats the audience as active participants rather than passive eavesdroppers. In addition, Brecht saw the theatre as spectacle. He even compared it to a sports event to which the audience comes with an attitude and knows what to do. Things that would be considered impertinent in modern theatres such as smoking and shouting were desirable for Brecht. Stephen Unwin sums up his “desired relationship between the audience and the stage [as such]: the spectator watches the action with all the objectivity, scepticism and analytical skill of a cigar-smoking chess player

considering his opponent's latest move" (51). This kind of "detachment of the spectator in epic theatre," Arrigo Subiotto argues, provides them with the "historian's critical view of events: he re-enacts them through description and indicates their relevance and significance through comment" (41).

Furthermore, Brechtian acting highly differs from Aristotelian acting due to the anti-illusionary aspect of the epic theatre. While Aristotelian theatre relies on mimesis and seeks to achieve realism on stage, Brecht's theatre opposes Aristotelian and naturalist theatres in which the inner psychologies of the characters are important and both the actor and the audience form an emotional bond with the characters through empathy. In Aristotelian theatre, actors and directors try to produce a life-like play and treat theatre as a closed room with an invisible fourth wall between the audience and stage, on the other hand, Brechtian theatre is all about breaking that fourth wall through different devices that produce an A-Effect in order to achieve a critical response from the audience towards the play. Brecht lists the differences between the dramatic and epic forms of theatre as follows:

*Dramatic form*

The stage 'portrays' an incident  
 Involves spectators in an action  
 consumes their activity  
 enables them to have feelings  
 communicates experiences  
 Spectators are immersed in an incident  
 Suggestion is used  
 Emotions are preserved  
 Human nature presumed to be  
 common knowledge  
 Humankind is unchangeable

/ eyes on the finish /  
 / one scene makes another /  
 Events move in a straight line  
 Natura non facit saltus  
 [nature makes no leaps]  
 The world as it is  
 What humankind should do

Its drives  
 / thought determines being /

*Epic form*

It narrates an incident  
 Turns them into observers but  
 arouses their activity  
 forces them to make decisions  
 communicates knowledge  
 Spectators are put in opposition to it  
 Arguments are used and  
 are turned into insights  
 Human nature is  
 object of investigation  
 Humankind is changeable and  
 able to change things

/ eyes on the course /  
 / each scene for itself /  
 in curves  
 facit saltus  
 [nature makes leaps]  
 the world as it is becoming  
 What humankind can do  
 / What humankind must do /

its motives  
 / social being determines thought

(Brecht on Theatre 111)

The mimetic performance seen in dramatic form gained prominence especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth century with the rise of realist and naturalist theatre. The acting method of the actor and director Stanislavski, which aimed to stage the play as a mirror of reality and urged total bonding of the actors with the character, was the typical acting method of the period. In Stanislavski's method, actors "had to put themselves into the characters' circumstances" (Merlin 24) and form a psychological identification between themselves and the character. Brecht's idea of acting was in direct opposition to this type of acting as he sought to destroy the fourth wall and always remind the audience that they were not watching the reality but merely a representation of it.<sup>1</sup>

*Gestus* is another term in epic theatre that is quite problematic as Brecht used it in a slippery way. Martin Esslin states *Gestus* not only means gesture but also "covers the whole range of the outward signs of social relationships, including 'deportment, intonation, facial expression'" and defines it as "the clear and stylized expression of the social behaviour of human beings towards each other" (*Brecht: A Choice* 119). Meg Mumford claims that Brecht had been using the word "throughout his writings to mean one or all of the following: social(ized) gesticulation as opposed to psychological facial expression; contextualized and alterable comportment; and the rhetorical crafted gestures of a performer" (54). John Willet brings together all of these aspects of *gestus* in his definition: "It is at once gesture and gist, attitude and point: one aspect of the relation between two people, studied singly, cut to essentials and physically or verbally expressed. It excludes the psychological, the subconscious, the metaphysical, unless they can be conveyed in concrete terms" (Willet 173). Hence, *gestus* is related with outward social forces that affect the interactions of characters rather than psychological or metaphysical inner forces. It is the accumulation of a whole range of expression of social behaviour, attitude, gesticulation, and physical expressions that subtly convey the social circumstances of a character. As Brecht states, "a *gestus* traces how humans relate to one other" (*Brecht on Theatre* 272). In line with this, Brechtian plays contain many carefully thought signs and gestures. Colin Counsell claims that the "gestic actor would break every scene into sections and find for each a gest which conveyed the character's social location/relations at that point. Each gest would be performed distinctly and with clarity so that its meanings were easily apparent" (87)<sup>2</sup>.

This is one of the reasons why Brechtian acting requires a deliberateness of action. Brecht urges his actors to always be aware of their actions and surroundings. They should not embody themselves with the character but show it from the outside. It is also required from Brechtian actors that they always reflect there are other alternatives for an action that is taking place to the audience. Esslin asserts that

the actor's attitude must always be so conscious, so fully rational, and demonstrative, that he is in fact telling the public: 'I have decided to go left rather than right. I could have gone to the right, but I am going to the left and *not* to the right.' This implies a deliberateness of action, a consciousness of the presence of the audience, which is diametrically opposed to Stanislavsky's ideal of an actor who is completely alone, completely wrapped up in himself and unaware of being observed. (*Brecht: A Choice* 117)

It is important to note again that an actor would never transform herself or himself into the character that is played. Therefore, Brecht asserts that the verdict "he didn't act Lear, he was Lear" would be an annihilating blow" for a Brechtian actor. An actor's feelings "should not in principle be those of his characters, so that the audience's feelings do not in principle become those of the character either. The audience must have complete freedom in this respect" (*Brecht on Theatre* 243).

To prevent the actors' identifying themselves with the characters and also to prevent the reader/audience from forming emotional bonds with the characters, Brecht also uses role-playing and masks. Brechtian actors often act multiple characters, and shift from one character to another on stage. Brecht claims that through role-playing, actors "fix for themselves a demonstrative attitude" (*Brecht on Theatre* 190). Moreover, masks are also used in epic theatre not as tools of illusion but as another device to create the A-effect as they usually contradict the role of the actor who wears them.

This use of a theatre indeed requires a considerable amount of time for the preparation phase for the plays. Carl Weber, who was Brecht's directing assistant as well as an actor, dramaturg, and director for the Berliner Ensemble, after Brecht's death claims that Brecht relentlessly encouraged his actors to try out different viable alternatives of a particular detail in rehearsals which often took hours for two minutes of worth of written material. During this time actors would offer some ideas, which then would be practiced and incorporated into the scene if Brecht liked the end result (190). Brecht's rehearsals were intense in the practical sense rather than theoretical. Especially at the

Berliner Ensemble, where he had enough time and resources, Brecht preferred to avoid lengthy discussions and to devote almost all the rehearsal time to active exploration (Patterson, *The Revolution* 179) and experimentation. In rehearsals, actors were expected to map out the contradictions and alternatives and carry them out to the actual performance. In order to do so and realise ways for achieving the A-effect, they used several methods like what Brecht calls “fixing the not-but,” using the third person, converting dialogues into past tense, uttering “stage directions out loud,” “translating verse into prose” and “translating prose into the actor’s native dialect” (Mumford 66-67).

Contradictions and alternatives play a significant part in epic theatre as they relate with the dialectic aspects of the plays. Unwin asserts that, as “his political analysis matured,” Brecht became interested in what he called ‘complex seeing.’ “By this he meant something more dynamic than despair at the myriad contradictions of the world; instead, he wanted to make these contradictions visible and show the causal link between wealth and poverty, money and power, and expose the different sides of the argument in such a way as to encourage debate” (55). In earlier plays, like *A Man’s a Man*, this dialectic relationship was not satisfactorily employed (Patterson, *The Revolution* 157). The more advanced use of such contradictions can be seen in *Mother Courage and Her Children* and *The Good Person of Szechwan*. The fluctuating success of Mother Courage’s business with constant downfalls contradicts with her insatiable acquisitiveness. In *The Good Person of Szechwan* for instance, a single actor plays both the well-natured female character Shen Teh and her ill-tempered male cousin Shui Ta character devised by Shen Teh herself in order to avert some misdeeds towards her. These kinds of contradictions are prevalent in epic theatre, and in this case, they are amalgamated in a single actor, which also serves as role-playing.

Brecht was against unchangeable tragic heroes with innate qualities that were prevalent in Aristotelian drama. His characters do not follow a fixed road and are subject to change with the actions and incidents that are taking place in the play. In Brechtian drama, characters are not born out of inner factors but are shaped by outer forces. They can be moulded just as the social environment could be changed, which intrinsically suggests to the audience that society can also change. As Brecht asserts, character



“should not be regarded like a stain of grease on a pair of trousers, which, however much you try to rub and wipe it away, will always come up again. In actual fact the question is always how a given person is going to act in a specified set of circumstances and conditions” (qtd. in Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice* 113). Hence, characters are representatives of their social class and they act in accordance with their social conditions and circumstances. Brecht claims that the development and conversion his characters go through are not an inner transformation; instead, their consciousness is determined by their social existence (*Brecht on Theatre* 265). In epic theatre, the action is not driven from the nature of the characters, but the characters are derived from their actions (Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice* 118). Hence, “the smallest social unit is not ‘the’ human being, but two people” (Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre* 247) and through social interactions development can transpire. As a result, the story rather than the characters is in the foreground in epic theatre.

Brecht states that everything “depends on the ‘plot,’ it is the core of the theatrical performance. For what *happens* between people provides them with everything that can be discussed, criticized, changed. [...] The ‘plot’ is the theatre’s great undertaking, the complete composition of all the gestic incidents, containing the communications and motivations that from now on must constitute the audience’s enjoyment” (*Brecht on Theatre* 250). Brecht called the plot or the story of the play *Fabel*, which is again a term with some connotations. According to Weber, what Brecht

called *Fabel* was the plot of the play told as a sequence of interactions, describing each event in the dialectic fashion developed by Hegel, Marx and, in Brecht’s later years, also by Mao. [...] Acting, music, the visual elements of the staging, in short, everything an audience perceived, had to contribute to the storytelling and make it lucid, convincing, entertaining and ‘elegant’ – as Brecht liked to put it. [...] He also insisted that each of the performance elements: acting, design, music and so forth, should remain a recognisable separate entity while it contributed to the *Fabel’s* presentation. (189)

Thus, as it was stated earlier, all of these elements along with *gestus* were deemed essential for the epic theatre in achieving an A-effect.

In “The Short Organon” Brecht claims that the plots of epic plays should not adhere to Aristotelian notions of unity of time and place. A linear plot structure through exposition to denouement with rising and falling of action in between is not desired in

Brechtian drama. Brecht states that in order to prevent the audience from being driven by the plot, the events of the play should be tied together in a way that the knots are easily noticeable. The episodes of the play must not succeed each other imperceptibly, rather it must be made sure the spectators can interpose their judgment. The scenes of the plot “therefore have to be carefully set off against each other, by giving them their own structure, that of a play within the play.” The scenes should be marked with titles that reflect the social point of an issue and act as an A-effect for the action at the same time by consisting of a tone in contrast to that of the action (*Brecht on Theatre* 251). Brecht’s episodic structure was in part influenced by Soviet film director and film theorist Sergei M. Eisenstein (1898-1948) who pioneered the practice of montage in his movies. Esslin remarks that the total effect of a Brechtian play will be “built up through the juxtaposition and ‘montage’ of contrasting episodes. While the ‘Aristotelian’ drama can only be understood as a whole, the ‘epic’ drama can be cut into slices which will continue to make sense and give pleasure” (*Brecht: A Choice* 113). The idea of episodic structure with contrasting scenes that could be independent plays on their own according to Unwin brings together a new type of artistic unity built out of such contradictory elements: “interruptions are encouraged, text is set against action, music is given its own reality, scenery is cut away, unconnected scenes follow on from each other and so on. The point is that by exposing the audience to such diversity, they are encouraged to think independently and come to their own conclusions. Thus the epic theatre is nothing less than dialectics in practice” (59-60).

In epic theatre captions and titles are sometimes used between scenes to inform the audience of the action that will take place in the following scene beforehand, thus reducing the wonder and suspense in an aim to let the audience approach the play critically rather than emotionally. For instance, Brecht’s play *Mother Courage and Her Children* consists of independent episodes all of which could be considered as a play themselves, thus conforming to a play within a play structure. Before each episode there are captions which relate to the actions that would take part in the episodes beforehand, limiting the effects of surprise and embodiment in the audience and letting them know the upcoming important actions beforehand and thus ensuring their critical rather than empathic response.

Historicisation is another device Brecht uses for the sake of the A-effect. Like other Brechtian terms, it has several meanings and uses. It is “designed to provoke an inquiring attitude towards the present through the past, and challenge dominant versions of history” (Mumford 173). Brecht asserts that actors have to play incidents as historical ones. Such events are unique and transitory incidents associated with particular epochs. The conduct of the people involved in them can be considered ‘universally human,’ “it includes elements that have been or may be overtaken by the course of history and is subject to criticism from the immediately following period’s point of view” (*Brecht on Theatre* 187-88). Historicisation can involve

presenting an event as the product of historically specific (rather than eternal) material conditions and human choices; showing the differences between past and present in order to highlight change; showing the problematic continuities between past and present in order to prompt change; and foregrounding the partisan and ideological nature of any writing or other telling of history. Brecht’s historicist approach is guided by the Marxist conception of history. (Mumford 173)

Brecht uses historicisation in both *The Good Person of Szechwan* and *The Mother Courage and Her Children* by putting the action in a remote time and place, respectively in the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648) in Central Europe and a small Chinese province but they actually refer to contemporary problems. Likewise, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, which also follows a play within a play scheme, is set in a collective farm in Soviet Georgia. Similarly, in *The Life of Galileo*, Brecht again returns to the seventeenth century and as with other plays mentioned, “he uses the far away and long ago to point a contemporary moral; in this case, the moral stance of scientists who permit their scientific discoveries to be used by politicians to questionable humanistic ends” (Fuegi, “The Form” 299).

Brecht was a committed Marxist with the aim to instigate social change and he despised the bourgeoisie, although he had a bourgeois background himself. So, Brecht “desperately wanted to change the world. For an artist merely to protest and to point out social and political evils by holding up a mirror to the world was not enough. Social and political injustice would never be eradicated by merely following that course. An artist had to do more, and Marxism extended the promise of creative action” (Reiss 145). However, Brecht’s plays were not restricted to socialist realism or any party agenda. Brecht did not employ or encourage such a direct approach. He was “against socialist

realism because he was for socialism and for realism” (A. White 20). Hence, Brecht reflected contemporary real-life problems such as capitalism, class struggle, poverty, oppression, war, fascism and Nazism as the themes of his plays in a manner that corresponded with the tenets of dialectical materialism. As John Fuegi puts forth, Brecht’s plays “deal with ‘the big subjects’ of the twentieth century” and exemplifies them as “the stock exchange and the manipulation of entire populations in time of war and peace” (“Toward a Theory” 437). While employing these themes, Brecht’s target was nearly always bourgeois ideology. Alfred D. White claims that “Brecht tends to provide a critique of parts of the superstructure of bourgeois ideology - family, science, charity, religion - more than he looks at the economic substructure” (16). Likewise, the playwrights that were influenced by Brecht around Europe also employed his theories in an effort to deliver similar criticisms of similar structures as well as their respective government policies.

The reception of Brechtian ideas in Britain was troublesome at first as a result of certain limitations such as the inaccessibility of Brecht’s plays to British dramatists until the arrival of the Berliner Ensemble and the lingual barriers in apprehending his theories. The British Isles were not part of the places Brecht resided in when he was in exile, and, as a result, he could not produce any one of his plays there in his lifetime. Although his reputation spread far and wide in Europe as well as in Britain, his theoretical works were not easily available in the English speaking world as they were in German. Translations required time and they often led to misunderstandings towards Brechtian theory firstly because certain Brechtian terms were inherently bound to the German language and defied translation and secondly because Brecht often used his terms with multiple meanings and continuously developed his theories. Although some of his plays were staged in Britain in as early as the 1930s, his intrusion into British theatre would take time because of previously mentioned limitations (Innes, *Modern British Drama* 121).

The year 1956 was a kind of turning point for British theatre. The first milestone was the production of John Osborne’s (1929-1994) *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court Theatre in May 1956, which had a meaningful impact in popularising and politicising the British stage. Yet, Osborne’s play did not reflect Brechtian characteristics. The

breakthrough that enabled Brecht's intrusion into British drama was the Berliner Ensemble's three week residency between 27 August and 15 September in the same year in London's Palace Theatre to perform *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and Brecht's adaptation of Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*, *Trumpets and Drums* in German (Barnett 136). With these performances English critics and dramatists saw Brecht's theatre and its devices at work for the first time. Yet the reception was incoherent as many of the critics condemned Brecht and the production of his plays by British directors, labelling Brecht as "a fraud and the inflated idol of faddists and perverse intellectuals" (Esslin, "Brecht and" 145). Again, such negative criticism arose from a misunderstanding towards Brecht and his theories and their misapplication by some British dramatists. However, there was a critic who championed Brecht and his theatre even before the Berliner Ensemble's arrival, namely Kenneth Tynan, "for whom Brecht was to become a point of reference in his subsequent theatre criticism" (Barnett 136). Tynan, who was the drama critic of the *Observer* at the time, made Brecht's name his "trademark" and a "symbol" that came to be "an example of excellence in playwriting, production, ideological commitment, care in rehearsal, dedication to the ideal of theatre as an art rather than as an after-dinner entertainment" (Esslin, "Brecht and" 145). The effect of the Berliner Ensemble's arrival was mainly seen in the area of dramaturgy as British audiences could not comprehend textual material without knowledge of German. Hence, directors rather than playwrights were more apt to be influenced by Brecht since the dramaturgical aspects of Brechtian theatre were easier to grasp.

There were several post-war playwrights who were influenced by Brecht as well, as John Arden's (1930-2012) *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* (1959) (Patterson, *Strategies* 45), Robert Bolt's (1924-1995) *A Man for All Seasons* (1960) (Gassner 38) and John Osborne's *The Entertainer* (1957) (Eddershaw 56), *Luther* (1961) and *A Patriot for Me* (1965) (Esslin, "Brecht and" 151) had some Brechtian elements in them. Arden's play was Brechtian "in its handling of political issues, its use of a kind of pseudo-history, its adoption of an episodic structure and its exploitation of 'popular' music to articulate events and ideas" while Bolt's play "exploits quite consciously the range of dramaturgical techniques, including a particular use of language and direct audience address" to achieve an A-effect, whereas Osborne's *The Entertainer* drew "on the

episodic nature and the direct actor/audience contact of epic theatre” (Eddershaw 56). Apart from that, Osborne aimed to make use of historicisation in *Luther* and *A Patriot for Me* but was rather unsuccessful in the attempt according to Esslin (“Brecht and” 151). Besides these playwrights, Arnold Wesker also tried to employ the epic form in his plays to some extent. He “assumed an episodic structure which nicely concentrated the ironies of life in the Air Force” in *Chips with Everything* (1962) (Styan 186). Similarly, in *Their Very Own and Golden City*, which was written in 1964 and first performed in 1966, Wesker dealt with “a social theme —the building of cities which are to be both beautiful and owned by their workers— [...] in a sequence of flash-forwards and flashbacks with compression of the time-sequence and other epic devices” (Esslin, “Brecht and” 151).

Brecht’s more powerful intrusion into British drama would take place with the Berliner Ensemble’s second visit to London in 1965 as his work impacted the second generation of British political playwrights. “Even in the writings of Brecht’s most prominent supporters, theory” was “systematically ignored, suppressed and trivialized” (Rebellato 149). Another important event the year before was the publication of Brecht’s theoretical writings as a whole with John Willet’s translation. Brooker asserts the importance of Willet’s work, claiming Willet’s presentation of *Brecht on Theatre* in 1964 “has supplied an English speaking readership with its knowledge of [Brecht’s] theory. Without Willett’s work and his collaboration with Ralph Manheim, the study of Brecht in English would plainly be nowhere” (*Bertolt Brecht* 6). With these developments and “much enthusiasm but somewhat less understanding, Brecht came to dominate much of British theatre in the 1960s and 1970s” (Leach, *Makers of* 142). British political playwrights such as David Hare, David Edgar, John McGrath, Trevor Griffiths and Caryl Churchill were adapting some Brechtian devices in their works for their political means (Reinelt, *After Brecht* 16, 208). Like other contemporary playwrights, Brenton too was influenced by Brecht and incorporated some of his devices into his plays.

## II. HOWARD BRENTON

Howard Brenton was born in Portsmouth on 13 December 1942 as the son of David Henry Brenton and Rose Lilian. His father was a policeman who later became a Methodist minister and his mother was a shop-worker (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 4). Brenton was influenced by his father's career as a burdened policeman who accomplished to become a minister after twenty-five years of hard work. Episodes from Brenton's personal life would later be reflected in his earlier plays such as *Christie in Love* (1969), *Wesley* (1970) and *Magnificence* (1973) (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 4-5). His father, who was also an amateur director, "played a part in introducing Brenton to the theatre" as well. (Boon, *Brenton: The Playwright* 5). Adolescent Brenton was effervesced by the plays of John Osborne and John Arden and he wrote "a biographical play on the life of Hitler when he was seventeen years old" (Megson 92). Brenton had an affection for abstract painting at school; however, he decided he wanted to be a writer and chose to study English at St Catherine's College, Cambridge (Megson 92). Brenton wrote poems and novels as well; however some of these are lost. Richard Boon notes that Brenton's earliest plays were *Ladders of Fools* (1965), *Winter, Daddykins* (1966) and *It's My Criminal* (1966) all of which were considered novice work by him (*Brenton: The Playwright* 7). Among these plays, *It's My Criminal* was staged at the Royal Court where Brenton was supported by the artistic director Bill Gaskill (Megson 92). Afterwards, Brenton joined the Brighton Combination, a theatre company of the British counterculture, and later started working on a play about Winston Churchill which would eventually become *The Churchill Play* (Megson 92-93).

Brenton's earlier works fall under the fringe tradition, and in the "Author's Note" for *Plays for the Poor Theatre* (1980) Brenton lays out his views which place him within the fringe generation:

Theatre takes place all the time. We *do* it all the time. It is not an art exclusive to massive stages graced by highly trained actors beneath massed lights. As most of us will sing a few notes during the day and song is not exclusive to a concert hall or opera house, so theatre is part of our daily discourse with each other. When you tell a joke, the day's events to a friend or loved one, when you set out to tell a truth or a lie – you set up theatre. (qtd. in Andersen 182)

According to Chris Megson, by the 1970s Howard Brenton collected a remarkable and extensive amount of experience at the various theatres that he worked with which included the “Brighton Combination, Portable, Open Space, Oval House, University of Bradford, Traverse Theatre Workshop and the Royal Court” (95). During this time Gaskill commissioned him to write another play, which would become *Magnificence* (Megson 95). Besides providing such practical expertise, the same companies also shaped Brenton mentally and politically. The years Brenton worked with the Brighton Combination were years of poverty and this helped him to learn writing precisely “with extreme concentration” (qtd. in Ponnuswami, *The Uses of History* 97). During this period, Brenton had to support his writing by working at a wide variety of jobs outside the theatre, such as labouring, factory and kitchen work and he reflected on these experiences claiming that they were more educating than his years at Cambridge as in certain ways they provided insights on how to survive, how to keep fit, and how not to brood over money (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 18-19). Such insights contributed to shaping Brenton’s leftist views and his attitude towards the working class. Another incident that politicised Brenton’s thinking was meeting with May ’68 activists on his visit to Paris in 1969 (Megson 93). In an interview in 1975 Brenton claimed that

May 1968 was crucial. It was a great watershed and directly affected me. A lot of the ideas in *Magnificence* came straight out of the writing of that time in Paris. [...] May 1968 disinherited my generation in two ways. First it destroyed any remaining affection for official culture. [...] But it also, secondly, destroyed the notions of personal freedom, anarchist notions of spontaneous freedom, anarchist political action: it all failed. It was defeated. A generation dreaming of a beautiful utopia was kicked – kicked awake and not dead. I’ve got to believe not kicked dead. May 1968 gave me a desperation I still have. (Brenton, “Petrol Bombs” 96-97)

This politicisation brought Brenton more in line with Brecht and what he wanted to accomplish with his epic or dialectical theatre. Yet Brenton was among British dramatists that would not readily admit Brecht’s influence on his work. In 1924, Brenton, like Gaskill, suggested that his contemporaries tried to move ahead of Brecht: “the search for something other than what Brecht was doing goes on endlessly amongst writers of my generation” (Brenton, “Petrol Bombs” 90). It is true that British dramatists did not fully adopt Brecht’s epic theatre but instead made selective use of some of his devices in their plays either due to the unavailability of Brecht’s theories in English written in a concise way, and their desire to experiment and create their own



style. Brenton made harsh and repudiating statements towards Brecht in a *Theatre Quarterly* interview:

I'm an anti-Brechtian, a Left anti-Brechtian. I think his plays are museum pieces now and are messing up a lot of young theatre workers. Brecht's plays don't work, and are about the thirties and not about the seventies, and are now cocooned and unperformable . . . I think Brecht's influence is wholly to the bad. (qtd. in Reinelt, "Bertolt Brecht" 46)

Despite these statements, Brenton went on and translated Brecht's *The Life of Galileo* into English and produced *The Romans* (1980) for the National Theatre, *The Romans* probably being the play that entailed the most Brechtian characteristics in Brenton's entire oeuvre. Hence, as it is noted by many scholars such as Martin Esslin, John Bull, Michael Patterson, Janelle Reinelt and Melissa Dana Gibson, it would not be correct to take Brenton's statements against Brecht at face value.

One of Brenton's earlier major works was *Christie in Love* (1969), which was commissioned by the Portable Theatre and is about the English murderer John Christie. It is among one of the finest fringe plays (Andersen 162) and it "comically exposes the sham of conventional social and moral values and develops further the controlled aggressiveness of style of his earlier plays" (Hay and Roberts 132). In *Christie*, Brenton uses juxtaposition and masks, which are also devices used by Brecht in order to achieve the A-effect (Reinelt, "Bertolt Brecht" 49). His next play, *Gum and Goo* (1969) is part of a trilogy and is one of the best known plays Brenton wrote for the Combination. Boon asserts that his work with the Combination also signalled Brenton's move away from the fringe and into the mainstream as he saw some elements that he thought were inhibiting his development such as the Combination's interest in community work towards young dramatists and actors and the *process* of making theatre. However, Brenton was rather interested in the literary field and writing plays for theatre audiences (*Howard Brenton* 41). With these early plays Brenton also experimented with the anti-naturalistic style (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 54-56) which would start to link his work with Brechtian theory. As for *Hitler Dances* (1972), this play links the stories of a dead German soldier from the Second World War and children playing games decades later. It involves actors playing multiple roles and donning masks. This play acts like a bridge between Brenton's past in the fringe and future in the mainstream. As Boon aptly puts forward, "*Hitler Dances* is both quintessentially a play of the Fringe in both its

character and the nature of its making *and*, [...] a vital progenitor of the epic, ‘state of the nation’ plays that were to follow” (“Howard Brenton” 153). Boon asserts that *Hitler Dances* “marks the first serious full-scale attempt to involve the audience directly in the *argument* of a Brenton play, to make the stage a public forum for a debate in which not only the writer and the actors take part, but also the spectators” (*Howard Brenton* 175-76). *Magnificence* (1973) is Brenton’s first full-length play. It was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre and it was the play that took Brenton to the larger stages for the first time. The play is about revolutionary action and terrorism. It makes use of Brechtian characterisation and episodic structure as the characters contain contradictory qualities and the scenes of the play are fragmented in action and style.

It could be said that Brenton still had some positive thoughts about the fringe during 1973 as he stated that it “could be the one surviving democratic means of communication” (qtd. in Boon, “Howard Brenton” 157). However, his divergence from the fringe started around this year. He would claim that the fringe audience had become “theatrically literate and the discussions afterward stopped being about the plays’ content and began to be about their style” (qtd. in Boon, “Howard Brenton” 156), which did not correlate with Brenton’s aim for political change. In 1973, Hare and Brenton’s fringe group the Portable Theatre went bankrupt and with their collaborative work *Brassneck* (1974), which was produced at the Nottingham Playhouse, these two playwrights stepped into the mainstream (Bull, “The Establishment” 328). The play was an attack on capitalism and corruption. The next year, *The Churchill Play* (1974) was staged at the same venue. The play was situated in a dystopian future in 1984. In the play, Brenton used an un-naturalistic and caricatured representation of Winston Churchill as it was common in the fringe which “frequently appropriated iconic figures from Britain’s imperial past as a part of its construction of a model of opposition to the status quo” (Bull, “History Repeating” 172). The year *The Churchill Play* was staged; Brenton would come to declare the failure of the fringe:

I think the fringe has failed. Its failure was that of the whole dream of an ‘alternative culture’ – the notion that within society as it exists you can grow another way of life, which, like a beneficent and desirable cancer, will in the end grow throughout the western world, and change it. What happens is that the ‘alternative society’ gets hermetically sealed, and surrounded. A ghetto-like mentality develops. It is surrounded, and, in the end, strangled to death, Utopian generosity becomes paranoia as the world closes in. [...] The truth is that there is

only one society – that you can't escape the world you live in. Reality is remorseless. No one can leave. If you're going to change the world, well, there's only one set of tools, and they're bloody and stained but realistic. I mean communist tools. Not pleasant. If only the gentle, dreamy alternative society *had* worked. (Brenton, "Petrol Bombs" 91-92)

It is seen that the fringe no longer satisfied Brenton's political aims. In another instance, Brenton provides a different outlook for his moving away from the fringe: "I think [...] that [...] the fringe was a historical thing. Where it went wrong was when the audience became sophisticated. [...] The fringe circuit audiences became spuriously sophisticated. David Hare identified it quite rightly and that was when it was time to get out – it was becoming 'arty'" (Brenton, "Petrol Bombs" 92). Gibson notes that Brenton "sees the Fringe as worthless when it becomes 'arty'— for Brenton the purpose of the Fringe is its politics" (204). Another reason for Brenton's move towards the mainstream was to widen his audience and use any means he had available to deliver his intended political messages. Brenton thought of these productions in the established theatre "as a part of an infiltration, in a way that related to playwright Trevor Griffiths's mid-1970s notion of 'strategic penetration' into television drama" (Bull, "The Establishment" 328).

With these views, Brenton completely shifted towards the mainstream and established theatre and away from the fringe tradition in the mid-1970s as his plays started to be staged at the subsidised National Theatre. The National Theatre opened on the South Bank in 1976, and Brenton's *Weapons of Happiness* (1976) was its first newly commissioned play (Bull, "The Establishment" 343). The play was directed by Hare and it intertwines a strike in a London factory with the hallucinations of a late Czech communist minister about Stalinist Czechoslovakia. Brenton reflected on his infiltration into the mainstream theatre claiming his team was like "an armoured charabanc full of people parked within the National walls" (qtd. in Kershaw, "British Theatre" 307). This new arena would allow Brenton to instigate political activity in the middle-class readers/audiences as well. On his move to mainstream, Brenton claims:

Writers on the left have to be a vanguard. They have to provide survival kits for people who are active politically. That is how I've seen the work so far. Also their work has to be at the service of the working-class. But in ways that are difficult to describe because you are addressing them to the people who are a potential political vanguard. And that is why the plays often have painful issues. Like Stalinism; what the party is; what violent action is; the actual reality of working-class life; working-class consciousness, which a lot of people on the left have to be

told — that people are up to their knees in concrete out there — which is the subject of *Weapons of Happiness*. (qtd. in Itzin 196)

However, this intrusion would not be a one-time affair as Brenton would continue to produce plays for the mainstream and at the National Theatre in the following years, and he would continue to engage “the hegemony of the great institutions from the inside” (Kershaw, “British Theatre” 307).

In these plays Brenton wrote in the early 1970s, it could be said that he was under the influence of Brecht and employed some of his devices. Patterson claims that although Brenton draws on the Jacobean for inspiration, he is still an heir to Brecht’s legacy and he shares with Brecht a “strong visual sense and an awareness of the importance of *Gestus*” (Patterson, *Strategies* 100-101). In his preface to *Plays: 1*, Brenton summarises the kind of theatre he tried to develop in the 1970s, and also illustrates the epic devices he used in his plays:

With *Magnificence*, and more fully with *Weapons of Happiness*, I was aware that I was trying to write a kind of Jacobean play for our time, a ‘British epic theatre.’ In retrospect, these are the principles. The characters, like William Blake’s poems, go from innocence to experience. The stories are of discovery. The characters change radically. Their past is rarely referred to, what is of importance is their present. [...] There is no ‘edging up’ to a revelation of a character as there is in, say, Ibsen. The scenes of the play are windows, opened at crucial points along the journeys of the characters, which show turning points in their lives and struggles. Each scene is written and should be played as a little play, in its own right, with its own style - some have asides, some do not, some are internal and psychological, others are group scenes with naturalistic settings. These differences should be emphasised, not smoothed over [...]. Disunity between the scenes will only help, not hinder. The end of the play is to be ‘open’, a gift for the audience - something for them to fall out over and keep warm with, while they’re waiting for the bus home. (xi)

Brenton moves on to claim these were all in retrospect and his only drive was to “get more onto a stage” and Brecht’s theories were useless to the British dramatists (Preface. *Plays: 1* xii). Yet the fact that he keenly adopts them in his plays reveals a different state of affairs.

The 1980s started with another play that was heavily influenced by the Brechtian tradition, *The Romans in Britain* which was staged at the National Theatre in 1980. It deployed similar techniques and reflected a similar strategy to use the theatre as a place for social and political argument (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 176). *The Romans* was epic in

scale and form; and controversial in content that it even led to a prosecution because of its depiction of the rape of a druid onstage against the play's director Michael Bogdanov. It could be said that *The Romans* was the peak in terms of using epic elements among Brenton's plays. However, Brenton is again not so sure about the epic quality of his plays since 1973 as he states in an interview he gave in 1978: "I'm not sure whether the big stage plays I've written since 1973 are pure epics. Measured against the Brechtian, received idea of an epic they are far from being 'pure epics.' But then the notion of a form in the theatre being pure I view with great suspicion" (Hay and Roberts 139). After *The Romans*, Brenton's plays reflect less and less Brechtian devices. Other major plays of Brenton include a Brecht adaptation entitled *Conversations in Exile* (1982), *The Genius* (1983), *Blood Poetry* (1984), *Pravda* (1985), which was written in collaboration with David Hare, *Greenland* (1988), *Berlin Bertie* (1992), *Paul* (2005), *In Extremis* (2006), *Anne Boleyn* (2010), *55 Days* (2012), *Drawing the Line* (2013) and *Lawrence after Arabia* (2016). Besides writing and translating works for the theatre, Brenton also wrote poems, novels, and works for television.

As Reinelt asserts both "Brecht and Brenton have ideological commitments. While some critics ignore or minimize these, they are central to their work. [...] The ideological commitments of Brecht and Brenton lead them dialectically, to view history and social forces materially, and to desire audiences to recognize and act on possibilities for political change" ("Bertolt Brecht" 51). And although Brenton "may not want to imitate Brecht's plays," he is "committed to an epic play structure" (Reinelt, "Bertolt Brecht" 47), especially from the end of the 1960s and peaking in 1980.

In line with these discussions, Brenton's contribution to British political drama and his commitment to epic theatre between the years 1972 and 1980 will be analysed in the following chapters through examining the predominant Brechtian devices employed in the plays that stand out in Brenton's career, namely, role-playing in *Hitler Dances* in the first chapter, episodic narrative structure and Brechtian characterisation in *Magnificence* in the second chapter, and historicisation in *The Romans in Britain* in the final chapter.

## CHAPTER 1

### ROLE-PLAYING IN *HITLER DANCES*

*Hitler Dances* was first performed at the Traverse Theatre Club in Edinburgh on 20 January 1972 by the Traverse Workshop Company under the direction of Max Stafford-Clark. The Edinburgh Traverse was “one of the new major Fringe venues” at the time (Andersen 214). The production “subsequently toured the country, including an Easter-week stay at the Young Vic, before opening at the Theatre Upstairs at the Royal Court in June 1972” (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 161). Despite being directed by a prominent director like Max Stafford Clark, *Hitler Dances* was not performed professionally for more than a few months in its opening year. It “has not received a full professional performance since, and was not published until 1982” (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 161). Although it has not seen a revival in major mainstream venues of Britain, *Hitler Dances* was and still is being staged by smaller companies in both Britain and around the world. The play received some mixed receptions from the critics as well. Peter Ansorge notes that shows “like *Hitler Dances* have been labelled by reviewers as insubstantial ‘comic-strip’ performances but they can be justifiably read as a reaction against a false representation of reality” (*Disrupting the Spectacle* 51). Another critic, Irving Wardle, “reviewing the play for *The Times*, remarks that Brenton’s refiguration of history is at once brilliant and inchoate: Brenton seems to ‘fall into the trap of being engulfed in the myths he is trying to manipulate,’ to the degree that the interinvolving of parody, play, history, myth, horror show, and kitsch becomes ‘too intricate and unrestrained’” (qtd. in Worthen 163). Lastly, Cordelia Oliver, comparing the play with the works of other playwrights Stafford-Clark worked with, claims that “Howard Brenton’s *Hitler Dances* is the tautest, best focussed text to result from these partnerships. [...] The result is a compassionate but quite unsentimental attempt to see all around and through the reality of [a] myth; the legend of the Anglo-French girl who became a British agent. [...] [I]t’s brilliantly inventive” (53).

The “starting point of the play was a single theatrical image, simple but enormously powerful” (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 164), which Brenton saw when he was on tour with the Portable Theatre in Holland:

I saw children in Eindhoven, which was flattened twice during the war, first by the Germans and then by the Allies, and is now the home of the world headquarters of the Philips Electrical Company. And at night in Eindhoven, the huge Philips sign, like a weird emblem, flashes everywhere in the sky. I saw a bomb-site there with children playing on it, while we were touring *Fruit*, and there the idea was lodged in my mind, because it was like children playing on this heap of rubble – history. And the idea of a German soldier coming out of the ground became meaningful. (Brenton, “Petrol Bombs” 94)

However, this inspiration of Brenton was not solely effective on the writing of the text as it was actually a collaborative effort that took five months to complete. When the company started working on *Hitler Dances* in Holland during October 1971 and went into the first rehearsal, Brenton had not written a single line of the play (Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle* 48-49). Brenton worked together with the Traverse company and explored “the themes and possibilities” the initial idea had suggested (Boon, Introduction vi). This fact highlights the collaborative effort behind the creation of the play as Brenton used the experiences in rehearsals as well as the ideas of the actors to shape the play. This kind of an approach to writing plays was not unfamiliar to Brenton as he had written fringe plays in a similar way earlier with the Brighton Combination. The difference with the Traverse, however, was that the company was also used to and had been committed to this kind of a writing method involving independent workshop with actors and musicians, instead of producing ‘straight’ plays (Boon, Introduction vii). The approach taken by both Brenton and the company is summarised by director Stafford-Clark in his words on his later work with the Joint Stock Theatre Company which could also apply to his work with the Traverse on *Hitler Dances*:

[The] work includes the actors, the director or directors, sometimes the designer, and of course the writer, and during that time there’s no script. The ideas of the play are discussed, and improvisations are initiated, not necessarily by the director, and this period acts as a fertilising ground or greenhouse for the writer. ... The writer’s free to incorporate any material from the actors’ improvisations or any material or ideas that weren’t discussed at all. The workshop simply acts as a way of being able to explore themes and ways of dramatising them. ... [Actors’] creativity is rarely called upon. You gain their commitment if you say to them ‘The script will finally be written by the author, but first we all have an opportunity to explore our own obsessions and create things from scratch, to explore, to initiate subjects.’ You’re tapping a source of energy that normally plays don’t demand. (qtd. in Boon, *Howard Brenton* 165-66)

The play was written under these circumstances where actors’ opinions and experiences were vital. Boon claims that the children’s games in the play, which “demonstrate the careful observation and recollection involved in showing how children really” behave

while playing games, were drawn from the memories of the actors and “the kinds of games they had played as children” (Introduction viii). Boon notes that, this research provided the narrative between Linda and Hans, the dead German soldier, in the first part of the play. Moreover, it enabled Brenton to develop a metaphor “for the relationship between the past and the present generally” through the relationship of the child Linda and old man Hans which is an important concern that characterises the work (Introduction ix) and which will be discussed later in this chapter. Although none of them had directly experienced the war, the cast also used their childhood recollections about the war like: “rationing, the sense of austerity, and the togetherness of the country during and just after the war” to recreate the atmosphere of war-time Britain and form a juxtaposition between the country’s past unified state and current disparate situation (Ansorge, “Underground Explorations” 14-16). These personal experiences also provided some of the stories in the play. Actor Carole Hayman presents one example in an interview with Peter Ansorge:

The line I say about my father having been shot down in France was certainly true. I was born three months after his death. That’s weird. Max’s father died in the same way. We are left with this terrible residue of our families having been twisted and decimated by events which took place before we were born. (“Underground Explorations” 16)

These personal experiences of the actors were valuable in helping Brenton shape the play.

However, these ‘second hand’ experiences were not enough to form the subject matter of *Hitler Dances*, thus the company also supplemented them with historical research and interviews “with members of the war generation, including Dutch resistance workers” which revealed the myths surrounding the war and created “a sense of distance between the attitudes of the company and those of the previous generation” (Boon, Introduction ix-x). Kevin Costello described this distance between the generations as follows:

There’s a total myth about the Second World War. My father was quite young when the war started. Yet he wanted to join up right away which is something inconceivable to me. I don’t think you could ever have a mass call-up in England again. Too many people would refuse to fight. It’s known that the only way those Battle of Britain pilots could get through their missions was to be pissed out of their minds *all* the time. That’s what the characters in *Hitler Dances* say



constantly—‘Back here in 1941 pissed out of our minds.’ (Ansorge, “Underground Explorations” 17, 61)

Another source for the company and Brenton was found in the films about the war. One of these films, *Carve Her Name with Pride* (1958) would provide the narrative for the story of Violette Szabo in the play. While the film sustains the myths surrounding the war by presenting “a mixture of light comedy, romance, glib heroism and glamourised violence,” research showed that this kind of presentation was inaccurate as “Violette’s mission was shown to be pointless and doomed to failure before it began [and] her death was due simply to administrative inefficiency” (Boon, *Brenton: The Playwright* 68). This sense of demythologising history is one of the main focuses of the play and it will be analysed in detail later in the chapter while tracing the use of historicisation.

There are two main narrative lines in *Hitler Dances*. Brenton reflects on the process of developing the two narratives together as follows: “I was aware of trying to find where two stories fit together, and doing that was like a critical process ... the story of a child and a dead German soldier, and a sexual murder and obscenity in that story – and in some way the two did fit together” (qtd. in Boon “Setting up the Scaffolding” 336). The play’s structure is fragmented and disjointed as “the two stories that are told constantly overlap and undercut each other, violently impacting together the people, places and historical situations that are separated in reality by many years and miles (Boon, Introduction vii). Various theatrical techniques are employed to tackle the complexity of the play. Brenton describes the play’s demanding style as follows: “the sense of being fluid, working very rapidly, ensemble playing, the rapid creation and dismemberment of effects, the involvement of story-telling, the juxtaposition, stylistically, of things that are quite different in a very powerful sense” (qtd. in Boon, *Howard Brenton* 162).

Technically, however, *Hitler Dances* requires few resources. The play requires only six actors and four musicians. Apart from lighting, which is used with a striking effect, all “the other technical resources of the theatre – costume, set, scenery, sound - are, largely for economic reasons, supplanted in favour of the actor’s ability to create and to inspire the audience’s imagination” (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 163). As a result of these limited resources, it is left to the actors to demonstrate the shifting aspects of the play as follows: “The violent changes in pace and mood, the sudden switches in location and time, and the need to portray not only different characters but different *types* of

characters, have all to be conveyed almost entirely by the actor's use of voice, body movement and use of the acting space" (Boon, Introduction xii). These technical details about the play reflect Brechtian qualities and lead to audience involvement.

Before moving on to the analysis of the Brechtian devices in *Hitler Dances*, it would be helpful to give a brief summary of the play and the historical background of Britain during the time the play was written. The play begins with the portrayal of the death of a German soldier, Hans, on the last day of the Second World War. Hans tries to return in exhaustion and agony to the ruins of his home country from a front two hundred miles away. He talks about the glory of the early days of the Third Reich as he dies slowly on the way. After this scene, the play moves forward twenty seven years into the future to the year of 1972 to "some-where [...] in Europe" (7) where children are playing over Hans's grave. The children try to decide on a game to play, while Tony suggests playing War, Linda protests claiming that in War you die and you cannot play if you are dead. Then they decide to play a kind of tag game, Enemies, during which they briefly demonstrate the relatives they lost in the war. Finally, Linda resurrects the dead soldier Hans after which all her friends depart in fear. Linda and Hans eventually form a relationship and Linda decides to leave home to live with Hans. Yet after a while, she gets bored with him and decides to leave him and return home. Hans manages to keep her interested by promising to tell her a story about a woman, which creates the second narrative of the play.

Hans's story is about a historical figure, Violette Szabo, a British agent in the Second World War. She is the daughter of a French woman and an English man. Violette falls in love and marries a French soldier, Etienne, who is then killed at the Battle of El Alamein. The widowed Violette is filled with anger towards the Germans and joins an anti-aircraft unit. She is then recruited as a Special Operations Executive agent by Captain Potter and sent to occupied France after being trained by Brigadier Badge in Scotland. During her mission, Violette is captured and interrogated by Hans Josef Keiffer. At the end of the interrogation, it is told that Violette was never tortured by the Gestapo and she was executed because of "administrative confusion" (Brenton, *Hitler Dances* 74). However, instead of showing Violette's execution, the last scene of the play merges the two storylines by putting Linda in Violette's stead, as the audience sees

Hans, again talking about his homeland, strangling Linda amidst the shouts and barks of a search group with dogs.

*Hitler Dances* is mainly about the approach towards history and the relation between the past and the present. As Andersen states, “the play is not about individually held notions but about our collective cultural ideas” (220). Hence, *Hitler Dances* does not take these issues in terms of individuality or psychology but as parts of society and culture. While handling these issues, Brenton focuses on the misconceptions about history and their reflections on the present generation. As Peacock asserts, *Hitler Dances* “dealt with Britain’s heroic mythologizing of the Second World War. The play focused upon the difference between fact and fiction, truth and lies, in the creation of history” (*Thatcher’s Theatre* 104-105). While speculating on these notions, Brenton places children and their games at the heart of the play. Brenton creates his argument between the past and the present and ‘fact and fiction’ by presenting both the children and the adults with the same actors on stage. According to Bull, “[t]hat the children conjure with the meaningless names of ‘great men’ of history as they would with those of their comic-book heroes is a part of the point Brenton wishes to make. Their absurd mythologising is a simplistic version of the essentially comic-book view of history through which most of their grown-up counterparts attempt to view the modern world” (*New British Political Dramatists* 33). Hence, Brenton’s arguments on history, myths and the relation between the generations are mainly conveyed through children and their games in the play.

The game motif also plays an important part in the play. Actor Kevin Costello notes the resemblance of children’s games with pre-literature theatre: “In a lot of the new groups you find a similar going back to childhood, to kids playing. [...] There’s a going back to the simple rituals—the ones a pre-literature theatre first grew out of” (Anson, “Underground Explorations” 14). Most of the arguments of the play are delivered through the medium of children’s games. The ritualistic aspect of the games Costello mentions is important as the Resurrection Sequence of the play resembles ancient rituals. Andersen notes that “the games are used deliberately as a ritual capable of ‘raising the dead’, much in the manner of the rituals of primitive tribes” (220). There is also a connection between these games and the subject of war in the play. As the

children start playing the War game on Hans's grave, they begin to discover the violence associated with the game for real when they manage to resurrect the dead soldier (Bull, *New British Political Dramatists* 32). Brenton also uses children's games to create a link between the generations: "*Hitler Dances* takes the world of children as its point of departure, showing parallels between children's play and the behaviour of adults, in particular in connection with the story of Violette Szabo" (Andersen 199). By the end of the play as Violette's story comes to an end and she is about to be executed, Brenton reveals the strangulation of Linda by Hans instead of Violette's execution, which is reported by Amaryllis. This scene is also the only place where the play's title is mentioned:

*With LINDA limp in his arms, TONY shouts over the din.*

TONY. Führer, my Führer, I hear you my Führer, dancing on my grave.

...

AMARYLLIS. Violette Szabo was executed at Ravensbruck Concentration Camp on the 25th of January, 1945.

*A pause.*

Hitler dances.

*Music continues. (75)*

By closing the play with these words, Brenton again emphasises the link between the past and the present and the way that ideas and approaches similar to Hitler's are still pervasive in the society. As Andersen points out, Brenton reveals how "our ideas about war are transmitted from one generation to the next" and as the title suggests "'Hitler dances' even in the present" (220). The choice to name Hitler in the title of the play is also an ironical allusion to the state of current generations in Britain. The ideological background of the Hitler era still lives in Britain. The disseminated war myths in contemporary time are somewhat similar to the propaganda of the Hitler era. Thus, by linking the stories of Linda and Violette at the end of the play, Brenton portrays the distortion on the current generation as a result of the past war myths. Moreover, it is significant to note the irony that Brecht's works were destroyed under the rule of Hitler and he was forced to live in exile.

To develop the above themes in his play, Brenton makes use of Brechtian devices. Although there are several epic theatre elements found in the play, role-playing is the most intensely used Brechtian device in *Hitler Dances*. The fact that there are two story lines that are developed alongside each other with a limited cast is one of the

contributing factors to such a vast use of role-playing in the play. The play constitutes a small group of actors and musicians incessantly changing roles on stage scene after scene. Throughout the play, Sabin Epstein plays the narrator, a kid, Hans, Linda's father Harry, Etienne, a Sargeant, an aeroplane and Hans Josef Keiffer; Kevin Costello plays the narrator, Hans, a kid, Mr Everyday, Linda's father Harry, an Instructor, Potter, a motorbike and a German soldier dog handler; Carole Hayman plays the narrator, a kid, Mrs Everyday, a "bitchy little girl," Linda's mother, a random girl, a girl watching a film, an aeroplane, a motorbike's side car rider and a dog; Amaryllis Garnett plays the narrator, a kid, a "bitchy little girl," Linda's mother, a random girl, an aeroplane and Violette; Linda Goddard plays the narrator, the Little Girl, a random girl, Violette and Violette's disguise, Jeanine Culot; Tony Rohr plays the narrator, a dog, a kid, Hans and Brigadier Badge. The musicians in the play also play some parts. Angie Rew plays a kid and a girl watching a film and David McNiven plays a kid and a Conducting Officer. These roles, as it is seen, also include animals and objects. The portrayal of the animals and objects by the actors diminishes the illusory aspect of the play and also acts as comic instances. In addition to these, there are some roles that are not named to a cast member but are undertaken randomly by the remaining actors besides the main figures of a scene, such as "bogjees," birds, a dog, twit officers and Linda's rescuers. These are usually momentary roles but they also contribute vaguely to the overall creation of the A-effect through role-playing. It is also important to note that Brenton uses the names of the actors and musicians rather than the characters. This serves two purposes: First, it emphasises the link between the generations that is discussed, and it also highlights the role-playing in the play and prevents identification with the characters. As can be observed, *Hitler Dances* has abundant material in terms of role-playing and they constitute the focal Brechtian outlook of the play.

The use of a narrator or multiple narrators was one of the devices Brecht devised in order to create an A-effect. In *Hitler Dances*, there is not a single narrator but all of the actors constantly step out of their characters and act as narrators as well. This constant phasing in and out of characters prevents both the actors and the reader/audience from forming a bond with the characters by continually reminding them of the representational nature of the work. There are different modes of narration in *Hitler Dances*. Some of the narrations merely provide background information about an action

that is taking place, while others impose and control the actions of other actors or characters. The first scene of the play is an illustration of these functions of the narrators:

KEVIN as HANS.

*On the floor a German soldier's tin hat, filthy tattered great coat and rusted mud-clogged rifle.*

*The HANS mask.*

*AMARYLLIS speaks aside.*

AMARYLLIS. Death of a German soldier, on the last day of the Second World War.

*She puts the HANS mask and uniform on KEVIN.*

*The company cower back from him with kisses.*

*They give KEVIN the voice for the mask with insults and catcalls.*

*As long as this takes ... (1)*

Here, all of the actors give life to the character of Hans through a deliberate process of mockery on the stage. Kevin, as Hans, struggles to make out a single word at first. He attempts to repeat and voice some of the words other cast members utter and tries to mime some of the directions they give. Finally, he finds his own voice “as the stereotypical Nazi villain” (Worthen 161); however, the company continues “to manipulate the character in a way that demonstrates both their ‘command’ of him as a function of the stage and the fact that they share him as a character” (Andersen 198) as part of role-playing since all of the male actors play Hans at one point. Hence, the character that is collectively created on stage by the actors is later played by some of them. By using different narrators, demonstrating the creation of a character on stage and eventually making multiple actors play that character, Brenton emphasises the fact that characters are mere representations. Thus, he distances both the actors and the reader/audience from empathising and forming an emotional bond with the characters.

Another use of the narrators is seen in the third scene of the play where Tony steps out of his role as a kid and starts narrating the rules of the Enemies game while in real time the others demonstrate the actions he is talking about:

TONY (*aside*). Enemies is a kids' game, it goes like this.

...

The game is to capture the bricks. But if you're 'had,' *like this* ...

*At once CAROLE and SABIN demonstrate. A smashing chase.*

*CAROLE is caught.*

You're dead.

*CAROLE raises her arms.*

But in the middle, in no man's land, you're safe. *Like this ...*  
*AMARYLLIS rushes forward, straight at KEVIN, who starts, then rushes at her.*  
*She darts back into No Man's Land. KEVIN hits a blank wall, and can't touch her.*  
*AMARYLLIS makes a thumb and nose gesture at him.*  
 That's the game! (11-12)

This narration and the subsequent role-playing by the actors emphasise the theatricality of the scene and “signify its status as artifice” (Counsell 95). Here, the actors, by means of the narrator's directions, perform the action that is told by the narrator in what could be labelled as a play within-a-play, hence exposing the play's theatricality even more. *Hitler Dances* is abundant with such instances of narrations that break the fourth wall and these constantly remind the reader/audience that they are reading/watching a representation and not reality. In line with the narration, the children's game motif here is also important for the creation of the A-effect. The idea of children playing on a historical grave was the theatrical image that inspired Brenton into writing *Hitler Dances*, and Brenton's use of children's games constitute an important factor in providing the Brechtian aspect of the play by reflecting theatricality hence providing an A-effect: “a game, played on stage, offers a metaphorical clue to an audience as to how to read the play, for the fundamental concerns of both ‘games’ are essentially similar: creativity, imagination, pretence” (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 48). The games signify the play's fictionality, that it is a product of the imagination. The games are also effective in creating different ideas in the readers'/audiences' minds: “the rapid, aggressive dynamism of children's play signifies the type of social and ideological interaction - making ideas ‘get up and dance’ - that lies at the heart of his style” (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 48). Hence, the image and the related children's games scenes that are at the midst of *Hitler Dances* are also fundamental for the play's Brechtian relation with the reader/audience.

Another role of the narrators in the theatre is that they provide background information about the actions that are not staged, or commentary in or between the scenes. This function of the narrators is also seen in *Hitler Dances*, but it is not merely used in the Aristotelian sense, as *Hitler Dances* does not have a single narrator and all of the actors step out of their characters and act as narrators from time to time. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the narrations usually introduce another story or play within-the-play; hence the use of narrators automatically functions as an inducer of the A-effect. In the

very short second scene, a narrator is used to describe the passage of time and the new setting of the play to such purpose:

KEVIN, *as himself, addresses the audience.*

*At his feet, the HANS regalia.*

KEVIN. Our German soldier. Rotted old corpse now, twenty-seven years on.  
Say hello to all the nice people, Hans, you rotted old corpse.

KEVIN *lifts the greatcoat sleeve, as if it was a dummy, makes it wave to the audience. Lightly, Punch and Judy.*

Hello hello – Jawohl Zieg Heil.

KEVIN *stands, and speaks more formally.*

And our German soldier looks up, his dead man's eyes see burning bomber planes shining with the stars.

Forever.

And with him in his grave there's the whole rag-bag.

Second – World – War.

Mouldering away down there, stinking. Oooh the pong.

...

Poor old Hans. Dead, in a scrap of ground some-where – any-where in Europe, with children playing on his grave. (7)

Brenton uses these narrated actions vividly hand in hand with role-playing here as Kevin uses the stage props like a puppet to impersonate Hans for a moment and then returns back to narrating. His narration not only gives information about the time and setting of the scene but also provides an outlook towards the war. Thus, the reader/audience is provided with some information to think upon and make their own commentaries on the action that is portrayed. They are also prepared for the action that will ensue in the following scenes as the Hans regalia which Kevin uses as a dummy will eventually come to life as the Hans character through different actors in the play.

Brechtian role-playing is discontinuous, and it is presentational “with changing role-bearers, playing not ‘characters’ but type-masks” (Wirth 65). It requires actors to play more than a single role for several reasons related with both the actors themselves and the reader/audience. Playing multiple roles enables actors to put a distance between themselves and the roles they perform and prevents the formation of an empathetic bond between the actors and the characters they play, and thus diminishes the significance of the characters’ personalities. In *Hitler Dances*, all of the actors take up several roles besides being narrators. One of Brenton’s aims with this was keeping the actors from a psychological performance: “One of the formal ways of doing that was to emphasize the role, the action. If you fit the two conflicting elements of the action into the same actor,



there is no danger, or it lessens the danger, of an actor working out a psychological performance” (qtd. in Andersen 198). Hence, the actors themselves are alienated from their roles, also resulting in an A-effect. Through this opportunity, the actors “continually adjust the relationship between personal and public history through roleplaying, revising themselves in their relation to history through the complex engagement and disengagement offered by the mask of ‘character’” (Worthen 160). Actors are not the only ones that are affected by the A-effect produced by role-playing. The readers/audiences are also denied creating a bond with the characters through all the role shifts and narrations which are done on stage without concealment. By being constantly reminded of the fact that what they are reading/watching is not reality but a representation of reality, the readers’/audience’s critical and intellectual capacities are triggered.

Just before the “Resurrection Sequence” of the play, through the end of the game-playing scene the children suddenly stop playing and act a stylisation of the game in slow motion in which they tell the stories of their lost relatives. Here, each of the cast members step out of their character momentarily and enact the relatives they have lost to the war. As it was mentioned before, some of the stories here are actual stories from the actors’ lives. This is an example of the effect of role-playing on the revision and alteration of actors’ relation to personal and public history that Worthen mentions above. These incongruous depictions in slow motion lead to an A-effect for both the actors and the reader/audience as well as they are out of tune from the rest of the action. With this scene, Brenton also creates a juxtaposition between the previous War game of the children and the harsh reality of the war which plays a significant part in communicating the argument of the play. As the actors relate their stories, the reader/audience is also directed to critically approach their own experiences in relation to the war or their relation to constructed war stories.

Another aspect of role-playing is that it can also lead to a comic effect which interrupts the action and directs the reader/audience to evaluate the scene that is presented from a new perspective. This aspect of role-playing is also used to create an A-effect in some serious scenes as the comic effect that is produced forms a contrasting attitude with the scene that is presented. In the “Resurrection Sequence” of *Hitler Dances*, Kevin and

Carole once again step out of their roles and engage in role-play as Mr And Mrs Everyday: “*SABIN on his way out of the earth ... and a comedy routine for CAROLE and KEVIN. The voices of Mr and Mrs Everyday out of the dark. As if they were watching this resurrection on a telly screen*” (17). Through the dialogue produced from this role-playing, Brenton provides commentary, and aims for laughs, which would serve as an A-effect as it would contrast the bleak atmosphere of the scene: “*the soldier coming out of the ground’s written here as a horror piece. With CAROLE and KEVIN’s dialogue, I want to destroy the image’s holiness for a time by cheap laughs, but still hold its power. To lodge the corpse in the play as HARD as possible*” (17). Without this dialogue, the scene which carries an air of horror and holiness would become far too dramatic and compelling for the reader/audience. Through the role-playing of Kevin and Carole, Brenton both applies comic commentary to the scene and prevents the readers/audience from being emotionally affected by the scene’s atmosphere.

Another character that is played by multiple actors like Hans is Violette, who is “another historical figure theatrically conjured into being: a ‘ghost’ invoked by the dead German soldier Hans, himself a ‘ghost’ whose masked corpse is resurrected from the rubble-heap of history at the start of the play” (Zeifman 135). But unlike Hans, Violette is the incarnation of a real historical figure, the British agent Violette Szabo. To prevent Linda from running away from him, Tony as Hans tells her the story of Violette and finally the figure of Violette appears on stage:

*TONY draws his hands down in the air, the figure of a woman.  
Not like the joke, dead serious, putting the grown VIOLETTE there.  
And before them, a spot comes up, gently, on AMARYLLIS. (33)*

Violette “is thus ‘constructed’ almost literally out of thin air; the fact that she is a construct, like all historical figures, is further emphasised by her being played at different times by all three women in the cast” (Zeifman 135). As Zeifman notes, Brenton attempts to reveal the myths behind Violette’s story – and other war stories – to the reader/audience by means of the A-effect achieved by both presenting the creation of the character onstage and making all the women actors play Violette.

The scene that follows Violette’s creation starts another instance of a play-within-play situation as the story of Violette is told with Tony narrating and dictating the flow of actions. Here, another layer of role-playing and story is added by Brenton to take

theatricality even further. As Hans relates the story of Violette meeting with the French soldier Etienne “both to Linda as Hans and to the audience simply as an actor” (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 183), which Amaryllis and Sabin demonstrate, Angie and Carole get included in the action as two girls watching the action as if they are watching a film. This deepens the play-within-play structure of the play, which is another device Brenton employs to create an A-effect. The two girls comment on Violette and Etienne’s relationship and the scene shifts dramatically into the wedding scene of Violette and Etienne, and eventually to the death and funeral of Etienne. The use of role-playing and play-within-play structure in these scenes enables Brenton to create a “sophisticated dialectic around which” he can construct “rich and complex investigations” (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 135) of the subjects dealt within the play. The death scene of Etienne is handled similarly to Violette’s growth and marriage in the previous scene, but this time Kevin is the relater of the events: “KEVIN *gives the blow by blow actions of ETIENNE’s death. The company goes through them by rote. SABIN repeats them, as ‘the ETIENNE actor’*” (37). Later in the scene, Amaryllis as Violette reflects on Etienne’s death:

AMARYLLIS. They wouldn’t tell me how he ...  
*She can’t say died, searches for a euphemism.*  
 spent his last ... times.  
 Only, if he died in North Africa, he must have ...  
 died ...  
 in the sand, And it must have been ...  
 hot.  
 And I know he crawled. Somehow I know he crawled.  
 ...  
 And in my heart I know he went blind too, crawling in the sand. I know he went  
 blind. (40-41)

Since Violette in fact saw all of these happen first hand, this monologue becomes ironic in a play where actors are on the stage the whole time and perform multiple roles. This creates a comic situation that is in contrast with the gloomy atmosphere of the scene for the reader/audience who is also aware of the fact that Amaryllis, who sadly recounts the death of her husband through suppositions, has actually seen it. That kind of a situation which creates contrasting emotions in the reader/audience with what is staged is very Brechtian.

The characterisation is also affected by the role-playing in *Hitler Dances*. The two main figures in the play, the German soldier, Hans, and the British agent, Violette Szabo, are played by all the male and female actors. This type of characterisation sets “[a]spects of personality and circumstance” together “side by side in a *pot-pourri* of ideas, emotions, events, experience” (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 187). Violette, who is played by each of the female actors “doesn’t come across as a complete consistent character. The audience might be confused by the Company swapping roles so often. But it’s what Howard Brenton wanted—he didn’t want us to present rounded character parts” (Ansoorge, “Underground Explorations” 61). The confusion in the reader/audience hinted by Carole Hayman here is in fact deliberately devised by Brenton for the sake of the A-effect, as it was previously noted in this chapter.

In an interview he gave in 1974 about the characters he used in his early fringe plays, Brenton claimed that “I’m very interested in people who could be called saints, perverse saints, who try to drive a straight line through very complex situations, and usually become honed down to the point of death” and he provided some examples from his characters that match this description, including Violette (Brenton, “Petrol Bombs” 93). As an undercover agent in France during the war, she “drove a pure line of hatred for the Nazis and all they stood for, and was in ignorance of the forces that propelled her, yet tried to keep a straight line” (Brenton, “Petrol Bombs” 93). Hence, while devising the character of Violette, it is evident that Brenton focuses on the inner contradictions and futile actions of Violette as much as the false information that is surrounding the real-life counterpart of the character.

Other characters in the play also have varying characterisations. For instance, the characterisation of the multiple German characters in the play is inconsistent “ranges from outrageous parody to near-naturalism” (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 198). Keiffer is reflected as a real and serious character while the other German soldiers that are searching for Violette are parodical. One character that is rather stable in characterisation is the Little Girl, and that character is played by a single actor, Linda Goddard, throughout the play. This fact automatically sets Linda as a central figure of the play in the eyes of the reader/audience. During the children’s game, Linda is the only child that argues against playing a game about war and death. She is the only

character that “is given a measure of individuality” and she “offers the hope of some humanity in this play” (Andersen 220). Unlike other children, Linda despises the violence in the games the children propose to play. The scenes between her and Hans where Linda comes across as a naïve character also carry similar contradictory aspects. Although Linda seems to have some control over Hans at the beginning of their relationship, that eventually fades away. Andersen claims that Linda shows “a degree of heroism on a small scale” as she embraces “– metaphorically and physically – the apparently disgusting and frightening ‘dirty old m[a]n’” she encounters (220-21). Thus, considering the fact that it is she who dies instead of Violette at the end of the play, Linda is presented as more of a ‘heroine’ than Violette by Brenton, again undercutting the mythical heroism about the Second World War that is disseminated by war movies and stories.

Historicisation is another important Brechtian device used in *Hitler Dances*. In an interview that took place in 1978, Brenton states that his plays are “deliberately written as ‘history plays for now’” (Hay, Roberts and Brenton 138). Brenton also claims in the same interview that “if you don’t understand the past, you’ll never understand the present, let alone the future” (136). Hence, in *Hitler Dances*, Brenton uses the Second World War as a remote time to make comments on contemporary issues. One of the concerns of Brenton is the relation between the past and present and how the past damages later generations which is given through the child and old man motif with Linda and Hans in the play (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 53). Just as Linda is captivated by Hans in the play, society is distorted by the past according to Brenton.

Freddie Rokem takes Brecht’s street scene allegory and offers substituting the “accident” there with “historical event” and adds the condition that the actor does not need to witness the events directly as in the street scene allegory but like a historian, could learn about the events in some other way:

The notion of performing history emphasizes the fact that the actor performing a historical figure on the stage in a sense also becomes a witness of the historical event. As a witness the actor does not necessarily have to strive toward complete neutrality or objectivity in order to make it possible for the spectators, the ‘bystanders’ in the theatre, to become secondary witnesses, to understand and, in particular, ‘to form an opinion’ about the forces which have shaped the accidents of history. Not even the facts about the past are completely ‘pure’ or unambiguous; they can be contested on different levels[.] [...] One of the aims of performances

about history is to make it possible for the spectators to see the past in a new or different way, as Brecht formulates the general aims of the theatre[.] (8-9)

With such an approach, actors can relate history in a new light. This notion of performing history stated here by Rokem is applicable to *Hitler Dances* as none of the cast is a direct witness to the Second World War and they demonstrate the incidents that they have learned through research. And the actors themselves also do not objectively approach the incidents but bring their own commentaries to the table. In the first scene where Hans' death on the last day of the Second World War is depicted, the cast provides some insights over historical incidents and takes a stance:

SABIN (*aside, deadpan*). What was the attitude of the Dutch, the French, the Yugoslavs, the Czechs, the Belgians, the Norwegians, to the German soldiers on the roads, in rags, limping back to the ruins of the Reich?

*Pause.*

Hatred.

*Pause.*

The occasional killing.

*Pause.*

Silence.

*All stare at KEVIN. He turns to them, a half-gesture. They stare back. He turns away and continues his trudge. (4-5)*

In these stares the past and the present meet on stage and there is a judgment unfolding. Through this act, the reader/audience is also invited to make their own judgment.

Another aspect of historicisation is related to the actors performing the acts as historical ones. Brecht in his essay titled "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting that Produces a *Verfremdung* Effect" asserts that

[t]he actor must play the incidents as historical ones. Historical incidents are unique, transitory incidents associated with particular periods. The conduct of the persons involved in them is not fixed and universally human; it includes elements that have been or may be overtaken by the course of history and is subject to criticism from the immediately following period's point of view. (*Brecht on Theatre* 187-88)

The fact that individuals are affected by the social structure they live in and their surroundings is important in Brechtian acting. Thus, "a discussion about character that does not take into account the historical forces which have shaped it cannot be convincing, and the telling of a story which does not include the conditions under which it takes place cannot be revealing" (Unwin 53). Brenton abides with these arguments in the depiction of the historical characters in *Hitler Dances*. Again, in the very first scene,

the actor acting Hans, that is Kevin, narrates some information about the circumstances of the era:

*At once KEVIN, simply to the audience.*

*Apologia.*

KEVIN. You see, really I had a very good time when I was a kid. Sewed my uniform myself, wouldn't let my mother do it. And my badges, I was so proud I'd sleep with my badges on my pyjamas, and with a little torch look at them, under the sheets, when all the rest of the house was asleep. And in the long mirror, I'd stand in my uniforms. And in my fantasy, whisper shouts to the Führer.

*A whisper.*

Führer my Führer.

*With passion.*

Oh I was innocent in my youthful nazi boots, free in the German fields, kicking the fresh grass. (6-7)

Here, Kevin gives the background and circumstances of the character he has been acting which are of an ignorant and innocent child who would turn into a monster metaphorically – and in fact in the following chapter literally – under the effect of the Hitler regime. Thus, the next scene, where the children are seen for the first time, will also inherently create juxtaposition between the children who are playing on Hans's grave, and their circumstances.

Brenton also uses historicisation to demythologise certain understandings of the past and change the reader's/audience's perception. As Reinelt asserts, he "struggles to go beyond the habitual expectations of the audience in order to challenge their status-quo perceptions. As a revolutionary socialist, Brenton shares Brecht's desire to show the possibilities for change — that things might be different from what they are" ("Bertolt Brecht" 50). The reality about the past and especially of the war is somewhat different from the perception of the public. This is mainly due to the propagandist works surrounding certain historical figures. Zeifman states that one "of the central concerns [...] of Brenton's drama is to demythologise the past by deconstructing representative historical figures. This move on Brenton's part to 'rewrite' history emphasizes that history is *written* (or, better, already rewritten), that it is subjectively composed (and therefore ideologically determined) rather than simply a recording of 'objective facts'" (132). Although Hans is a fictional representative of a historical character, Brenton also uses a real-life historical figure that is surrounded with myths, the British Special Operations Executive agent Violette Szabo, in the play. Szabo was captured during a mission in France and was executed in the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp in

Germany in 1945 (Knowles 336). The version of the character in the play is taken from the 1958 movie *Carve Her Name with Pride* in which Szabo is presented as a war hero (Peacock, *Radical Stages* 113). Brenton “uses the play to demonstrate that the real story of Violette has, in fact, been changed in crucial ways in the film to make it acceptable as a myth about war heroism” (Andersen 220). In the play, Brenton deconstructs these myths by revealing that Violette’s mission was in vain, and by claiming that she was not tortured as portrayed in the film, before the last scene by Sabin as Keiffer:

SABIN. Oh Vi, there’s no ‘magnificent gesture’ that can’t be defiled. Mucked. Messed. Believe, me Miss Heroine, all pure. The hero, hung over the fires, in the cellar of the Avenue Foch, blind and silent.

...

Please hear why the Gestapo never tortured you, in the Avenue Foch. Why that scene in the film, never took place.

Because ... Of administrative confusion. They lost your papers, Violette. That is why you were never sent for again, by Hans Josef Keiffer.

*A small bow.* (74)

Here, Brenton remarks that “the narrative of Violette’s torture by the Gestapo was a complete fabrication” (al-Kasim 58). Brenton is refuting this fabrication of myths as facts which are passed on from one generation to another in *Hitler Dances*. The demythologised Violette presented by Brenton in the play is “fighting not to preserve freedom but unconsciously to *subvert* it” (Zeifman 136). The play’s director, Max Stafford-Clark commented on this, claiming in “order to fight fascism, the country had to become fascist itself. Violette is trained, corrupted, turned into a killer. To fight evil a society often unites and responds in an evil way” (Ansorge, “Underground Explorations” 16-17). The harsh training of Violette, the lack of a real motivation behind her actions which comes from knowledge instead of vengeance, and the futility of her mission are all emphasised by Brenton to reveal the unsound propaganda of Western countries about war and heroism. Brenton’s “attack in *Hitler Dances* was, then, upon that glorified mythology of war perpetuated by the entertainment industry which, as the performance of the play by ‘children’ is intended to illustrate, is absorbed by successive generations of the young” (Peacock, *Radical Stages* 113). And by showing the death of the Little Girl, Linda, rather than Violette on stage at the hands of Hans in the final scene, Brenton once again reflects the intrusion of past myths over the current generation.



Episodic structure and multiple narrative lines are other Brechtian techniques that are seen in *Hitler Dances*. As it was stated in the introduction of this thesis, in plays that follow an episodic structure scenes are not linked with a cause and effect relationship. Moreover, they are independent parts on their own and each with their own theatricality. Brenton's "plays often feature discontinuous episodes linked not by necessity but by design" (Reinelt, *After Brecht* 22). There are some really short scenes among the twenty-four scenes in *Hitler Dances* which are usually fragmented and disjointed. "Juxtaposing two narratives is another of Brenton's recurring epic techniques that builds on the plasticity of his spatial conceptions" (Reinelt, *After Brecht* 22). The action moves between the two split narratives in *Hitler Dances* which eventually come together as one by the end of the play. There are some sudden changes of character and setting within some scenes as well. At the beginning of the nineteenth scene, Linda starts as Violette, but she suddenly switches to the Little Girl:

*An aeroplane made by LINDA as VIOLETTE, SABIN, CAROLE and AMARYLLIS.*

*Spin out of the aeroplane, into the parachute effect.*

*All spinning, lit by a beam from floor level, passing through their upraised arms again and again, like a lighthouse beam ...*

*Then suddenly LINDA as the Little Girl.*

LINDA. No!

*The beam fixes on her. She breaks from the parachute, crouches as the Little Girl.*

(62)

This scene prepares the reader/audience for the final scene where the two storylines actually merge as here Linda takes the place of Violette. Scene twenty-one, "Keiffer's Interrogation," and scene twenty-two, "The Adventure in the Field," "are played with one scene frozen into the other" (68) and in the final scene the Little Girl instead of Violette is killed. With its interspliced narrative and disjointed episodes, it can be said that *Hitler Dances* is a good example for a play with an epic structure.

As for the lighting, it is probably the most utilised dramaturgical element in *Hitler Dances*. It is used with "the kind of striking effect to be found throughout the playwright's body of work" (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 163). It is not always bright as in Brechtian plays, yet there is no attempt to conceal the objects and movements related to production, which helps to achieve an A-effect. Some prevalent actions and scene transitions are stressed with the use of lighting through blackouts or sudden flashes.

Although there are some short scenes in which Brechtian very bright lighting are used, such as the third scene where the children's game is played, Brenton uses the lighting mostly to create an effect, which makes it one of the aspects of the play where he diverts from the norms of the epic theatre.

The use of music is another Brechtian element in the play. Stephen Unwin states that like in Aristotelian theatre, music is usually used to create or emphasise emotional effect, but it is also “essential to the alienation effect, in that it interrupts the flow of the action, provokes a fresh look at what is happening and highlights the emotions in such a way that they are quotable and consumable” (68). In *Hitler Dances*, music is produced by the three musicians of the cast, among which John Ramsey is the only musician who is solely responsible for the music as others often join the action as well. The first appearance of music in the play is in the first scene, where the character of Hans is being given to Kevin by the company: “*Music begins. Music ‘effects,’ both by amplifying and pulling against the words*” (5). As it is understood from the stage direction, music is used here in a Brechtian sense, both as a way to amplify and reduce the intensity of the words and action. Music is also used to dictate action in *Hitler Dances*. The characters are often interrupted or urged to action through drumrolls. An instance of this is seen in the twelfth scene of the play, where Etienne's death is portrayed and the lines and actions alternate with the drumrolls. Thus, music acts as another device that creates an A-effect.

There are also six original songs in the play. Besides these, the company sings other songs from time to time, such as the nursery rhyme *Oranges and Lemons*. Songs in epic theatre are usually used as devices for commentary at the end of the scenes. They are also used to interrupt the action, and create an A-effect by establishing a mood different from the actions performed on stage. In Brechtian theatre, “songs were introduced not only to interrupt the plot, but to bring out the tawdriness and vulgarity of mass produced culture, which serves as the context for lived experience” (Rapaport 149). In short, most of the songs in *Hitler Dances* also act as commentaries for the actions in the play at the end of the scenes; however, some are used throughout the scenes as well.

The play is also Brechtian with its use of set, props and costume. Brecht “did not favour full naturalistic sets, and instead indicated locations with a single piece of stage

property” (Counsell 95). In *Hitler Dances*, the other technical resources besides lighting “- costume, set, scenery, sound - are largely for economic reasons, supplanted in favour of the actor’s ability to create and to inspire the audience’s imagination” (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 163). Hence, with the bare stage, Brenton again aims to keep away from an illusionistic approach that aims to visually create the changes in scenes and locations. He leaves that part to the imagination of the audience and the efforts of the actors. The lack of set in the play “requires changes of location [...] to be conveyed almost entirely by the actor’s personal resources: his voice, his body, his positioning on stage” (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 162). The props and costumes that are used are mainly related with the Hans character. In the third scene, for instance, when they are playing the Enemies game, the stage direction urges actors not to use bricks which are required for the game: “(Mime them – not important to actually have them. Tho’ you could use apples instead)” (12). The props are also left lying around when not in use, and also at the end of the play. These contribute to revealing the theatricality of the action, and serve as another A-effect for the reader/audience.

Finally, the play also makes use of masks for certain characters. As many of the roles are shared among the cast of the play, masks provide a sense of continuity for characters that are acted by multiple actors, such as the Hans mask. Masks are also used for characters that are acted by a single actor, namely Potter and Brigadier Badge. These are not directly used to create an A-effect but as comic devices. However, masks are used as a Brechtian device when characters swap roles, as all of the changes of attire are done in front of the audience. Brecht emphasises this technique in his poem “On Everyday Theatre:

The mysterious transformation  
That allegedly goes on in your theatres  
Between dressing room and stage – an actor  
Leaves the dressing room, a king  
Appears on stage: that magic  
Which I have often seen reduce the stagehands, beerbottles in hand  
To laughter –  
Does not occur here. (*Brecht on Theatre* 178)

Similar to the other props, the characters leave their masks on stage when they are not used as can be seen in the last scene before the final song, “[t]he company take off any

*masks etc. and leave them on the stage*” (75), which again emphasises the theatricality of the play and urges the reader/audience to think upon their present real-life situations.

By using these Brechtian devices to lay emphasis on the theatricality of the play, Brenton also stresses that just like the play itself, the myths surrounding the war are also constructed. Mainly with the use of role-playing and direct audience address, and along with the other devices, Brenton emphasises the collective nature of cultural assumptions towards war and questions the heroic myths disseminated by countries and films. Hence, through these techniques, he invites the reader/audience to a critical approach towards the play and thus, it can be said that the aforementioned devices serve their purpose in creating the desired response in the reader/audience and aid Brenton to convey his intended political message.

*Hitler Dances* is an important play in Brenton’s career as it stands between his fringe work and later mainstream work. It is characteristically a play of the fringe in many ways, as “the scale, the method of production, the kinds of theatre technique invoked all reflect not only Brenton’s earlier work, but also his debt to the theories and practice of Fringe theatre generally” (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 208). However, it also employs many Brechtian elements that are fundamental in delivering the intended messages to the reader/audience. The most intensely used Brechtian technique in this play is role-playing, as all the actors act as narrators and act multiple roles and use direct address to the reader/audience. The play also includes play within-a-play sequences, which further emphasise the theatricality of the play. Historicisation is also another important element, as by setting the play in a remote time, Brenton creates a critical connection between the past and the present, and debunks myths about the war. In *Hitler Dances*, Brenton employs an interspliced narrative structure, where two lines of action and narration finally merge with an increased effect on the reader/audience. The set, costumes and props used in the play are minimal in line with Brecht’s theories, and music is used to instigate and interrupt action as well as for commentary through songs to create the intended A-effect. *Hitler Dances* “is a summary and the pinnacle of Brenton’s Fringe work; it is also the progenitor of his neo-Jacobean epic theatre” (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 208) as Brenton continues using Brechtian devices to deliver his intended political messages to a wider range of readers/audiences with another play, *Magnificence*.

## CHAPTER 2

### BRECHTIAN CHARACTERISATION AND EPISODIC STRUCTURE IN *MAGNIFICENCE*

*Magnificence*, Brenton's first full-length play, is the play that enabled his transition from the fringe into the established theatre for the first time. Prior to *Magnificence*, Brenton's plays were mainly performed by fringe companies at fringe venues. The play was commissioned by the Royal Court Theatre and was written while Brenton was a resident dramatist there. After three re-writings and some turbulent times with uncertainty about on which stage the play would be performed or whether it would be performed at all (Roberts, *The Royal Court* 144), the first production of the play took place on the main stage of the Royal Court on 28 June 1973 and was directed by Max Stafford-Clark who was the resident director of the Royal Court at the time and with whom Brenton had also collaborated on *Hitler Dances* in 1972 (Milisavljevic 17). The play ran for three weeks in its original production. After forty-three years since its original performance, in 2016 *Magnificence* was revived by the director Josh Roche of Fat Git Theatre, and in association with the artistic director of Finborough Theatre, Neil McPherson, at the Finborough Theatre in 2016 for a four week run (Brownlie-Marshall n. pag.). These two runs, separated apart by more than forty years, are the only professional representations of *Magnificence* in the British scene.

*Magnificence* was commissioned by the Royal Court's former artistic director William Gaskill, who was highly influenced by Berliner Ensemble's visit and was supportive of the new playwrights who were interested in experimentation. Gaskill was especially helpful to Brenton early on in his career, even arranging him some jobs when Brenton was facing financial problems, which Brenton recounts as follows: "Gaskill had been very kind to me. [...] It was all Gaskill. He was extremely careful with me, a dramatist who was very much at odds with some of the things he was doing" (qtd. in Roberts, *The Royal Court* 144). Yet Gaskill left the Royal Court after the play's submission. The production of *Magnificence* was uncertain at first as some of the prominent members of the Royal Court were not so keen on staging the play. There were several members of the artistic council who opposed the production of the play, including the new artistic director Oscar Lewenstein. There were also Anthony Page, whom Brenton initially

wanted to be the director of the play, and Lindsay Anderson, the fiercest critic of the play, who voiced his distaste of the play openly several times. Anderson stated that *Magnificence* was a play “which I never liked and of course disgraced myself with the young *avant-garde* by making it quite clear that I didn’t like it and I’ve been reactionary ever since” (qtd. in Roberts, *The Royal Court* 146). He also inquired the thoughts of the play’s director Stafford-Clark on the play in the interval of the first preview which Stafford-Clark recounts as follows: “‘You don’t really think this is a good play, do you?’ He positively disliked the play and his attitude certainly was extremely contagious” (qtd. in Roberts, *The Royal Court* 146). Even the audience were provoked into making negative claims from the stalls from time to time. Remarkably, some of these responses were from the radical circles in the audience since in the play Brenton questioned the validity of violent revolutionary action. One of the members of the audience, shouting from the stalls, labelled the play as “bourgeois rubbish” (Little and McLaughlin 166).

Brenton recalls the process of trying to produce the play among this negativity:

I fought for the play a lot. ... Oscar offered me a Sunday night ... but he promised to beef up the decor a bit, and I had the presence of mind to turn that down. They then said they would do it Upstairs and I also said no, I didn’t want that. So the play was a kind of football and I talked to Tony Page several times, but he never felt he was really going to come to water about it ... (qtd. in Roberts, *The Royal Court* 146)

Brenton’s insistence on staging the play in the main bill could be explained with his desire to carry his messages to a wider audience, even though that audience might not be open inherently to such messages because of their bourgeois background: “I’d rather have my plays presented to 900 people who may hate what I’m saying than to fifty of the converted” (Hay and Roberts 133). Despite the opposition of the several members of the Royal Court, Brenton notes that it shows the courage of “what is said to be an orthodox and middle aged and safe theatre” to appoint him as resident dramatist and to put his play on (Browne 101). Hence, in an interview with the *Theatre Quarterly* in 1974, Brenton is thankful for the support of the institution: “[A]lthough I’m not in the tradition of the Court – I’m not what you would call a humanist writer, not of the mainstream of the Court at all – they’ve always been good to me” (“Petrol Bombs” 88).

Although *Magnificence* is considered a key play of its time as it signifies a fringe playwright's transition into the mainstream, it could not be considered a success in terms of box-office: "Over the twenty performances, *Magnificence* achieved only 26 per cent of capacity, with 36 per cent of seats sold. The total loss of the run was £12,500 against the Arts Council grant of £7,500" (Roberts, *The Royal Court* 155). Such little audience and much financial loss were not significant for the play's director Stafford-Clark as he indicated that the "reputation of the play and the perception of it as a kind of turning point, the first time that kind of work has been welcomed on to a main stage, was out of all proportion to what it cost and the number of people who saw it. At the time, those of us who were involved were aware that it was a significant step" (qtd. in Roberts, *The Royal Court* 155). The play was lauded by another important figure, Sir Peter Hall, who wrote in his diary the following entry: "To the Royal Court to see *Magnificence* by the new writer Howard Brenton. This is bursting with talent although not fully achieved. He has no sense of overall form yet. But there is a great imagination at work and a wonderful power of speech and character. [...] Brenton is a writer worth watching" (66). This criticism would later provide another significant step for Brenton in his career, as Hall would commission a play from him to be staged at the opening of the new building of the National Theatre on the South Bank, which would realise Brenton's entrance into this state subsidised venue with *Weapons of Happiness* on the Lyttelton stage in 1976. Besides Hall, Martin Esslin also praised *Magnificence* "as a 'genuine' exploration of an issue" (qtd. in Healy 89). The 2016 revival of the play also received a mixed reception. Michael Billington praised it, claiming "[s]eeing the play again, I was struck as much by Brenton's poetic power as by his capacity for political analysis. [...] Josh Roche's production carefully evokes the divisions of early 70s Britain. Joel Gillman has the right steely fervour as Jed, Chris Porter is horrifically plausible as the heartless bailiff and Tim Faulkner as the Tory minister is the perfect embodiment of privileged smoothness" (n. pag.). Aleks Sierz, on the other hand, claimed that "[a]lthough it captures some of Brenton's visionary moments well, it is a bit messy and hesitant, as if the task of reconciling the playwright's switches of tone is just too, too much. [...] So while this revival proves that *Magnificence* is worth looking at, it fails to be either compelling or particularly coherent" (n. pag.).

In writing *Magnificence* Brenton was influenced by the events in May 1968 and the revolutionary movements that grew out of those events. The events which were situated in France began as a “series of independent movements, protests, and strikes that were in response to a variety of conditions” (Haxo 4). However, authorities did not meet the demands of the protesters and resorted to violence. As it was also stated in the introduction of this thesis, Brenton was highly affected by the 1968 movement in France and later visited Paris in 1969 and recalled his experience in an interview with Itzin and Trussler as follows: “I met many people who were survivors – barely survivors – of what had happened in ’68. I began to think of political things for the first time. The sense of loss was enormous: something had been attempted by my generation and it had been smashed” (qtd. in Boon, *Brenton: The Playwright* 30). The fact that Brenton was writing about his generation for the first time also proved some difficulties for him in conceiving the play since, as Brenton states,

there was a huge personal element in it and that it was written about people exactly my age whose minds bear similar shapes to mine and my friends’ ... and whose language is very like how we speak. Therefore, the authenticity of it has to be hammered out very accurately, because it’s so close and, in a sense, more painful. So it was much more difficult to write. (qtd. in Boon, *Howard Brenton* 231)

The ideas and debates surrounding Brenton’s generation at the time of writing the play was about efficacious ways of political action as they were left disillusioned in the aftermath of May 1968.

The events of May 1968 introduced several “political ideas about revolutionary activity” one of which was Situationism “which argued that individual experience has been completely undermined by modern science and technology and by capitalism creating in people ‘needs’ which are the result of cultural manipulations” (Haxo 5). During his visit to Paris, Brenton got acquainted with the Situationists and was influenced by their notions of “disrupting the spectacle” and their “irreverent stance towards traditional artistic forms” and he applied these theories into his dramatic works (Penner 73), which is highly evident in the case of *Magnificence*.

On a visit to Amsterdam in the beginning of the 1970s, Brenton also had a chance to gain first-hand experience on the subject of *Magnificence* as he “became intimately acquainted with the type of student squat revolutionaries who inspire[d]” the play



(Healy 88). *Magnificence* was written in reaction to the extremist activism of groups like Angry Brigade and the Red Army Faction. One attempt at militant action by the Angry Brigade became an inspiration for Brenton in writing of the play as he reveals in his interview with Dickson: “They were decent, perfectly bright students who decided to blow up the Ministry of Defence and then went to jail. It was a tragedy of waste, really, and that became the play” (n. pag.). The most recurrent theme of the play is the questioning of the philosophy, ethics and methods of these radical groups.

In *Magnificence*, the revolutionary action is the squat set by the young people at the beginning of the play. Through this image, the play “indicates Brenton’s interventionist strategy, his own ‘disruption of the spectacle.’ His concern was to bring into the mainstream not only the political arguments of the Fringe but also its experiments in theatrical style” (Boon and Price 640). Brenton not only carries his political attitude to the Royal Court, but also his artistic and stylistic approach that he developed in the fringe. Since his times in the fringe with the Brighton Combination, Brenton came to learn to use the available – often limited – resources efficiently and to appropriate his plays for their respective readers/audiences, and he used this feat to his advantage with *Magnificence* as well: “Ever since then, I’ve thought like that. Even the play I’ve written for the Court, it’s written deliberately for the stage here, deliberately to the audience that comes to this theatre” (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 30-31).

In order to deliver the intended message, Brecht and Situationist Guy Debord were Brenton’s main influences. Brenton claims that Debord’s book *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967)

was a huge influence. It argued that society was like a printed circuit board that operates along certain channels, without which the economy won’t work. Public life is a massive spectacle that everyone pretends to be part of, but no one is. I thought that this was a brilliant analysis, and very interesting for a playwright – after all, what do entertainments do but disrupt the spectacle? (Dickson n. pag.)

Hence, through his art Brenton questioned the situation of the left of his time and the philosophy, ethics and methods of the leftist radical groups. He continues stating his motivation in writing *Magnificence* as follows: “Disrupting the spectacle is a valid artistic aim; it can be enjoyed by writers and audiences. But I wasn’t a bomber. There was a horrible psychodrama developing on the left at that time: middle-class Maoists

telling you you're impure, bourgeois, because you won't go and kill someone. Horrible, but understandable. And interesting." (Dickson n. pag.) Thus, with *Magnificence* what Brenton tries to accomplish is 'disrupting the spectacle' through art while at the same time providing a critique on the waste and futility of attempting to 'disrupt the spectacle' through acts of terrorism.

*Magnificence* is set in the 1970s in London and the play deals with the themes of homelessness, poverty, violence, police brutality, inequality and unemployment. During the period the play was written, the Labour government of Harold Wilson was defeated in 1970 by the conservatives under the leadership of Edward Heath, who became the prime minister. The effects of the 1968 movement were seen in Britain as well with the actions of militant groups like the Angry Brigade, who bombed the house of Robert Carr, the Secretary of State for Employment in 1971. This provided one of the main sources that resulted in the genesis of *Magnificence*. In 1972, unemployment was over one million, miners were on strike, terrorist bombings were continuing and eight of the Angry Brigade members were prisoned for ten years after the longest criminal trial in British history (Bull, *New British Political Dramatists* xii-xiii). Although some of these issues are dealt with in the play, Brenton claims that "*Magnificence* was written to try to resolve the author's confusions about the nature of revolutionary action" (Preface. *Plays: 1* ix). Hence, the play's "concerns are with the aftermath of 1968, with smashed idealism, the failure of the alternative culture and the emergence of the terrorist" (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 214).

*Magnificence* consists of eight scenes with an interval after the third scene. The play begins with a group of young activists', namely Jed, Mary, Will, Veronica and Cliff, occupation of a disorderly, empty, second floor property. The beginning of the first scene reveals their attempts at getting into the house, barricading the doors, arranging their supplies, claiming the place with slogans written on the wall and a banner hanging out of the window, and arguing about the action they are undertaking. At the end of the scene, an old man appears from the corner of the room among the newspapers. After that, the scene moves to outside of the house to the dialogue of the two representatives of public and private authority, the Constable and the bailiff Slaughter. Their whimsical dialogue is about different aspects of life: their jobs, science, the state of law

enforcement, politics. The bailiff has an eviction order and he decides to evict the squatters at dawn. The play then returns to the room, which is now in chaos. It is ten days since the group first occupied the place and both the room and the group are in a miserable state. Mary, who is six months pregnant with Jed's baby, goes through some exercises. Then, they notice that Slaughter's men are outside and desperation ensues in the group. Veronica expresses the futility of the squat as Slaughter's voice is heard through the microphone. As his men are trying to enter the room with blows on the doors, Veronica chants from the *Thoughts of Mao*, with the group in hysterical laughter and tears. Finally, Slaughter and the Constable break into the room and in a scuffle Slaughter kicks Mary's stomach, causing her to lose her child. The first half of the play ends with Jed recounting the aftermath of the incident, which includes his imprisonment for nine months, his drug addiction in prison, and his release with frustration and anger.

The second half of the play begins at Cambridge College with a dialogue that revolves around personal and political matters between Babs, a former minister and a current scholar, and Alice, a current minister, both members of the Tory party. Babs is seriously ill and he dies after a ride on a punt at the end of the day. The play then moves on to the day Jed is released from prison. He is met by his friends outside of prison and there he experiences a short vision where he seeks guidance from Lenin. Jed then meets with Will, who has gone on with his life and become less politically involved after the squat, as Jed finds out. Jed convinces him to engage in an act with him, which he does not disclose at first. Jed and Will then go off for a few days to return with a pack full of sticks of gelignite. The rest of the group is shocked to find out Jed's plan as Cliff and Veronica object to their intention while Mary is paralysed. Jed and Will then go to Alice's house in the countryside where they confront him. Jed puts a mask with the bombs on Alice, whom he mistakenly thinks is in the Ministry of the Environment –and thus responsible for the housing problems–, but the fuse fails to go off as Will runs away. Jed stays disillusioned while Alice tries to convince Jed not to kill him. Just as Jed seems to come to a peaceful resolution, Jed throws the mask to the floor and the gelignite explodes killing both Jed and Alice. The play ends with Cliff's epilogue as an aside, which describes Jed's act as a waste.

The title of the play, *Magnificence*, is mostly contradictory to the political incidents in the play. The adjective form of the word, magnificent, is defined as “extremely beautiful, elaborate, or impressive” (“Magnificent” n. pag.). However, the initial political action, which is the squat that the group undertakes, is an act that is far from magnificence. This act eventually completely fails with devastating effects to the squatters. The word “magnificence” is uttered only once in the play by Jed when he describes the anticipated outcome of his attempted terrorist attack on Alice. If this terrorist attack had been successful, then it would have been “magnificent.” Yet, Jed’s attempt to “disrupt the spectacle” ends disastrously as he accidentally kills both himself and Alice, which, again, undercuts the magnificence of his act.

Brenton uses several Brechtian devices of major and minor importance to handle the themes and deliver the intended message of the play. The most apparent of these devices is the Brechtian characterisation that Brenton employs in the play. Janelle Reinelt claims that issues “of contradiction and coherence are inherent in any theatre committed to dialectics” (“Bertolt Brecht” 48). In *After Brecht: British Epic Theatre*, Reinelt asserts that both Brecht and Brenton come across such contradictions and devise their techniques of characterisation accordingly. She quotes their approaches to characterisation in order to reflect their similarities (23): Brecht claims that it “is too great a simplification if we make the deeds fit the character and the character fit the deeds; the contradictions that are to be found in the deeds and characters of real people cannot be displayed in this way. [...] The unity of the character is in fact formed by the way in which its individual characteristics contradict one another” (*Brecht on Theatre* 23). Similarly, Brenton states,

I’ve always been against psychology in plays. I think that psychology is used like a wet blanket by many playwrights, and as a very easy explanation and I wanted to stop that dead in its tracks[...] [...] One of the formal ways of doing that was to emphasize the role, the action. If you fit the two conflicting elements of the action into the same actor, there is no danger, or it lessens the danger, of an actor working out a psychological performance. (qtd. in Boon, *Howard Brenton* 84-85)

As it is seen in these quotations, both Brecht and Brenton are against in-depth psychological depiction of their characters and they think that contradictions are fundamental elements of characterisation as they make the characters more real and also help create the A-effect both for the actor and the reader/audience. Brenton employs

contradictory features in both different characters in the same scene, or in a single character throughout the play.

The dialectic aspect of the first scene mainly comes from Brenton's characterisation of Veronica and Will. Veronica, who is a middle-class woman working at the BBC, is a latecomer to the group. From the beginning of the squat, she seems critical of the group's attitude and motivations and gets into a constant quarrel with Will, who, at that time, is one of the most assured members of the group about their radical actions. This contradictory aspect of her relationship with the group and especially with Will is evident from their dialogues while the group is making preparations for the squat. Moreover, Veronica is always at odds with the group. When all the group members write their names on the wall, she does not want to do so at first. When Mary brings out the banner with the slogan, Veronica finds the banner useless and the slogan childish. She thinks that their actions should matter for the people they are fighting for, not for themselves:

VERONICA. Will, I know I've come late to the group. And I wasn't with you when you argued out what to do. But don't let's write messages and slogans. If we've got to scrawl over everything, let's at least scrawl how it is. Like ... (*She thinks.*) Like ... after all the official figures, sums, percentages and lies there are ... (*Writing 1,000,000 on the wall.*)

MARY and WILL. Ohh ... Ohh ... Ohh ...

VERONICA. Homeless in the city. And where are they? Why aren't there tents all over the Hyde Park? Human foxholes in Kensington Gardens? But people are there, poked in somewhere.

...

VERONICA. But we've got to be [...] Real! Real to the old ladies outside. So we can say ... Look, it's real. The decay. The vicious city. The brutal squandering. It's real, here ... (*She stamps.*) Down your street. Dear God it matters.

WILL. I know it matters.

VERONICA. Then don't festoon it with half-baked idiocies. (*She jerks the banner with her foot, viciously.*) (Brenton, *Magnificence* 42-43)

These debates not only serve as a reminder of the facts about the housing problem in Britain, but they also make the reader/audience think about the correct ways of political action through the contrasting views and personalities of the characters. Veronica's words lead the reader/audience to question not only the actions the group is undertaking, but the whole idea of correct political action. With these dialectic qualities among his characters, Brenton tries to keep his readers'/audiences' critical judgment constantly alive throughout the play.

There are contradictions in the relations between the characters as well. One of the people who is “poked in somewhere,” as Veronica puts it, is actually in the room with the squatters. Just as the group settles in the room, an old man in rags rises from the newspapers at a corner of the room, without confronting the squatters. The old man who happens to use the derelict house as a place to stay also forms a contradiction between the whole group and their intention. He is among the people whom they are trying to help, however their actions cause an obstruction to the old man’s use of the derelict house. Moreover, the old man repeats a single word, “fuggin’” (60), throughout the squat. Paul Haxo points out this “patronizingly depicts the urban under-class as almost completely helpless” (12). As he does not show any reaction to the things happening around him, the inaction of the old man contradicts the idea of organising and moving together with the people for revolutionary action that some of the group members believe in.

The Constable and the bailiff Slaughter introduced in the second scene of the play also have some contradictory features. In this scene, Brenton juxtaposes two enforcers of law from private and public sectors. Slaughter is an old and coarse man who is prone to mistakes and is associated with corruption while the younger Constable reveals himself as more philosophical and within the bounds of law. There is a constant tension between these two men as the Constable tries to be respectful and nervously keep things in control while the bailiff comes across as an unreliable partner. There are similar juxtapositions and power relations between the former and current Tory cabinet members, Babs and Alice. There is a contrast between Babs’s “own waning career and Alice’s rising star that has brought about the meeting” (Boon, *Brenton: The Playwright* 87). Babs criticises Alice’s new artificial appearance and ideology. Like Slaughter, he tries to assert dominance over Alice in their conversation about their political and private lives. Although they are members of the same political tradition, Babs loathes Alice and labels him as a “peculiarly modern, peculiarly English kind of fascist” (80). Through the contradictions and unnaturalistic and comic dialogues of these characters, Brenton lays out some of the themes of the play such as housing, corruption, state of the law enforcement, politics and homosexuality and creates an area of discussion around these topics for the reader/audience.

Characters in *Magnificence* also carry some contradictions within themselves and they change their attitudes with time. Alice for instance, is controlled and dominated by Babs in their conversation that leads to Babs's death in the fourth scene. However, in the last scene of the play where Jed and Will put the gelignite mask over his head, Alice acts as a calm and composed person in a life-threatening situation. After Will runs away and the fuse fails to go off, Alice attempts and succeeds at convincing Jed not to kill him. His powers at persuasion in this scene are in contrast to his previous situation with Babs. This is mainly due to the contradictions between these two characters as well. Alice is way more experienced than Jed, and he is much more aware of the motivations behind Jed's actions (such as the Situationist theory) than Jed himself. This fact enables Brenton to urge the reader/audience to comprehend the lack of thought and meaning behind Jed's attempt at militant action.

Brenton uses the contradictions and changes in the attitude of the characters to discuss the efficacy of the group's political actions and their motivations behind these actions as well. Will was very motivated for the action they are undertaking while they were at the squat. After the failure of the squat and Jed's imprisonment however, he turns into a much more passive character. Brenton reveals the drastic change in Will and Jed's attitude in the sixth scene where Jed and Will meet for the first time after Jed's release from the prison. In this scene, Brenton creates a juxtaposition between the two characters and their pasts as Jed confronts Will:

JED. I remember a sharp little man.

WILL. Please don't, Jed.

JED. Childish. A talker. Got on your nerves.

WILL. Please don't, Jed.

JED. But loyal. Hard. Diamond at the core. Fearless.

WILL. Please don't, Jed.

JED. A sharp little man, who for all of his being a fool, did ... I really do believe he did ... love the people. And had the guts to do a little about his love. And I'm standing here, looking down at what's left of him. (88)

In this confrontation, Brenton paints Will as a person who drifted away from his previous political ideals. Will's political activism becomes representational as he is alienated from a firm course of political action. His use of political figures in his attire is without any meaning:

JED. What's Mr Guevara to you?

WILL. Tee shirt. (*Shrugs.*) I mean, it's just a tee shirt.

JED. There's a face on it.

WILL. Oh come on.

JED. Years ago, you'd have pissed on the very idea o' going about in this.

WILL. 'S just a shirt.

JED. *What happened* to you?

WILL. 'S just a shirt! Could be Marilyn Monroe on there, or Benny Hill.

*A pause.*

Micky Mouse. Steve McQueen. Apollo moon landing. Stars an' stripes. Hammer an' sickle.

*A pause.*

'S just a shirt. (90)

The Guevara image in Will's t-shirt becomes just a mundane symbol without any significance for him. It is the capitalist world and everyday concerns that causes Will's socialist ideals to perish: "Keeping a correct political point of view is something of a chore. Your mind begins to wander. I mean ... I know when the milkman calls, you should grab him by the throat, and politicize him on the spot. But it's difficult. Specially if you owe him six weeks. An' you want your cornflakes soggy" (91). By revealing the contrasts in both Will and Jed's characters, Brenton continues to make the reader/audience think on the issues of correct political action. This reaches a climax when Jed continuously slaps Will to make him follow his plans on his militant action: "WILL *crouches down.* JED *slaps him in the face. Fairly hard, ad repeatedly, but carefully – like someone bringing someone round, who's unconscious*" (sic) (92). Moreover, Brenton uses the image of Jed slapping Will metaphorically to bring those to themselves who are alienated from their political ideals by the everyday concerns of life, in other words, those who are "unconscious".

The change in Jed's attitude as the main character of the play is also noteworthy. Jed is an example for the characters which Brenton labelled as "perverse saints" as it was exemplified with Violette in *Hitler Dances* in the previous chapter of this thesis. Jed too, attempts 'to drive a straight line through complex situations,' and he too becomes sharpened to the point of death. Jed, who rallies for "No unnecessary damage" (36) while they are trying to break into the room in the first scene of the play, changes dramatically into a militant who dreams about the "magnificence" of the image of a cabinet member bleeding on the lawn: "Can't get rid. Can't shake it off. Magnificence, that it would be magnificent to have you bleeding on the lawn" (104). The change of Jed's character between the first and the last scene of the play and the dialectic nature of



his history is a point of argument provided for the reader/audience by Brenton. Brenton takes this argument one step forward when Jed, just as he is about to be persuaded not to resort to any violent action, accidentally kills both himself and Alice in a tragicomic scene. His honing down through the play from the first scene to the last concludes with his death. These moral contradictions of the characters in the play create an A-effect by forcing the reader/audience “to struggle to understand [their] behavior and to ask if it is appropriate and/or inevitable” (Reinelt, “Bertolt Brecht” 49).

Brenton himself provides a connection with Brecht when depicting the characterisation of Jed. He thinks that traditional theatre readers/audiences make the assumption that

the person with whom the playwright spends most time, is right. But I tried to write a play where he was manifestly wrong, and it's a tragic wrongness, because his passion is right, but his actions were ill-judged and romantic. ... This is the *Mother Courage* syndrome, in that an audience's sympathies rush, like water down hill, towards the person who speaks the most and they assume he's right. But I wanted him to be obviously wrong - wrong in a complex way. (qtd. in Reinelt, “Bertolt Brecht” 49)

Brenton approaches the creation of the character of Jed dialectically as well. There are some substantial positives in the Jed character which make him “wrong in a complex way”: “There are precious things about Jed – his ferocity and his conviction and his allegiances are admirable. A tragedy is involved because he takes a wrong direction, as one could oneself so easily. I could find myself in the streets with a bomb in my hand sometimes. One's feeling of rage gets terribly unreasonable” (qtd. in Boon, *Howard Brenton* 231). Thus, Jed's passion for a revolutionary movement is valid, yet the means of action this passion takes him is just wrong for Brenton. Hence, he uses Cliff's epilogue to comment on the futility of Jed's action: “Jed. The waste. I can't forgive you that. The waste of your anger. Not the murder, murder is common enough. Not the violence, violence is everyday. What I can't forgive you Jed, my dear dead friend, is the waste” (106). With this speech, Brenton tries to make sure the audience does not sympathise with Jed's tragic demise and think of alternative ways of action to channel their anger towards the system. However, the general passivity of Cliff in the play is one of the points Brenton criticises himself about the play:

I did realise it too late and the structure of the play is badly marred because of it, but the person who's carrying the wisdom of the play is the boy Cliff. His knowledge of what's going on and what to do about it and his sense of the tragedy

involved is very strong, but he disappears from the play. He doesn't occupy a central scene. (qtd. in Boon, *Howard Brenton* 230)

Brenton attempts to mend this situation by giving the last words of the play to Cliff and through these words imply to the reader/audience the futility of Jed's action and urge them to think of a better political action.

Through Jed Brenton also discusses the Situationist theory in *Magnificence*. Situationism is a movement that has a connection with Brechtian theatre and James Penner draws the relation between Situationism and Brechtian theatre in his article "Spectacular Disruptions: Situationism and the Terrorist Gesture in Howard Brenton's *Skin-Flicker* and *Magnificence*" which handle the issue through Brenton's two dramas on acts of terrorism: Both Brecht and Brenton are influenced in part by Jacobean plays to make the theatre a place for "social analysis and critical engagement rather than an art form that was devoted to solipsism and psychological issues" (74). Brenton notes that Jacobean theatre often demystified the power structures by revealing that the "prevailing system of power constructs [...] individuals not as free agents but as pawns of ideological struggle" (Penner 74). Jed is an example of such a figure, and he uses the arguments of Situationist theory to explain the motivation of his intention in using violent militant action: "Bomb 'em. Again and again. Right through their silver screen. Disrupt the spectacle. The obscene parade, bring it to a halt!. Scatter the dolly girls, let advertisements bleed ... Bomb 'em, again and again! Murderous display. An entertainment for the oppressed, so they may dance a little, take a little warmth from the sight, eh? (*He laughs.*) Go down into the mire eh? Embrace the butcher, eh?" (96). Here, Jed creates a link between an incident he saw at the cinema once, where a drunk spectator threw his bottle of wine right at the screen and tore it, leaving a mark on the entirety of the movie. Jed thinks that terrorist action would have the same effect on society. Similarly, what Brenton also does with *Magnificence* is to disrupt the spectacle, but in a civil manner since he brings the style and political atmosphere of fringe theatre into established theatre with the play for the first time. Brenton makes the mainstream theatre a forum for political argument in a very similar vein to Brecht. It should also be noted that Jed's last words in this speech are from Brecht's *The Measures Taken* which is also the epigraph Brenton uses for the play.

Aside from Brechtian characterisation, another epic device Brenton adopts to significant effect in *Magnificence* is the episodic structure of the play. As it was mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, the structure of the plays that use an episodic structure are fragmented, the scenes do not strictly follow each other, and hence they do not adhere to Aristotelian unities. The scenes are “made up of a number of stories that all contribute to some overarching theme or purpose” (Scott 30). There are often different narrative lines in plays with an episodic structure and the playwrights also employ different styles throughout the play. All of these are used in order to achieve the desired A-effect in the reader/audience and urge them to approach the play critically rather than emotionally. *Magnificence* covers what could be considered as a long span of time in the standards of drama as the play moves nine months forward in time with Jed’s release from prison. The locations also change from scene to scene. Thus, the play does not follow Aristotelian unities. The scenes of the play do not connect with each other imperceptibly as well. They are not fashioned in a linear way that builds up towards a climax and evokes suspense. Brenton uses such a design to deliver his message to the reader/audience by leaving spaces for them to pass their judgment.

In epic theatre, “the story unfolds in a number of separate situations” that are rounded and complete in themselves (Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice* 113). In a similar way to *Hitler Dances*, Brenton uses two narrative lines in *Magnificence*. The narrative of the young revolutionaries is interrupted by the story of Alice and Babs, the two upper-class cabinet members, and these two narratives meet at the end of the play when Jed accidentally kills himself and Alice with a stick of gelignite. Episodic plays consist of “a series of loosely knit scenes” (Barranger 120). In Brechtian theatre, the scenes of a play can be considered as mini plays in their own right. Even if the whole of an epic play is cut into slices, it “will continue to make sense and give pleasure” (Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice* 113). In accordance with these, Brenton, as it was mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, describes the scenes of his plays as windows showing critical points in the characters’ lives and that they should be played as mini plays on their own with their own styles (Preface. *Plays: I* xi). The scenes in *Magnificence* have these qualities. Most of the scenes in the play can be considered as smaller plays on their own. They have their own style, structure and conclusion. For instance, the first scene where the group prepares for the squat, the second scene which consists of the dialogue of the bailiff and

the Constable as they wait to evict the squatters, the third scene in which the eviction happens with some dire consequences, the fourth scene where two Tory cabinet members converse about their private and political lives and which concludes with the death of one of them, the sixth scene in which Jed and Will clash with their changed personalities, and the last scene where Jed accidentally kills Alice and himself can all be presented as small plays on their own. In plays with an episodic structure “the individual scenes and the relationships linking them with each other are more important than the relationships between them and the ending” (Pfister 69). All of these scenes have the episodic qualities that would allow them to be isolated from the whole of the play, yet they also have linking relationships among them that amplify the message in the whole of the play when they are together.

These scenes have some very distinct stylistic features as well. The first scene of the play that reveals the squat is naturalistic, while the exchange of the bailiff and the Constable in the second scene is cartoonish. The fourth scene with Babs and Alice is almost surrealistic. Brenton describes his motivation behind using different styles in *Magnificence* as follows:

I wanted to establish different worlds very strongly in the play. I think one of the glories we've lost in the arsenal of the playwright is to use different styles completely. If I want to write about the old men who use a very elegant language, I go straight into it. I don't worry about the style of the play or anything, just aim to get the truth of those men speaking to each other. Then, have a policeman and a bailiff – go into that. Don't worry about the world of style: write, and if it's truthful, they'll hold and act off each other. Just as the old playwrights had verse, rhyming verse, sonnets, broken blank verse, prose and songs. When it was fitting that someone spoke in prose, they went into it. And when it was fitting that a lover spoke in a sonnet – he went into it. I wanted with *Magnificence* to claim that freedom. I wanted to write each world – there are three: the people who occupy the house, a bailiff and a policeman, and the old men – simply on the terms which those scenes demanded. (“Petrol Bombs” 93-94)

This stylistic freedom Brenton claims in order to reflect different worlds in the play truthfully is one of the aspects of the play that was lauded by the critics and contributed to the success of the play. The scenes of the derelict house reveal the dire situation of the squatters which contrasts with the comical scene between the Constable and the bailiff outside the house, where the street is shown with a paint on a drop cloth. When these two worlds collide with the bailiff's assault on the group, the comedy of the

situation turns into tragedy as the bailiff kicks Mary in the stomach while trying to hit Will, causing her to lose her baby in the process.

The first half of the play ends with this scene and the next scene which takes place nine months later in the Cambridge College with Alice and Babs is again quite distinct from the former one in terms of style. The naturalism observed in the first half of the play is absent in the second half. The “slight surrealism” of the fourth scene “is born of the artifice of the old men’s language and of their manipulative dealings with each other, and of the privilege of their world” (Boon, *Brenton: The Playwright* 89). These stylistic differences in the scenes allow Brenton to reflect the different worlds of the characters and guide and prepare the reader/audience for the messages in the different episodes throughout the play. Brenton stresses that “[c]oherence within a play is not a matter of choosing to write in one style. That’s just sameness, superficial neatness. Actual coherence means using many different styles, moulding them, a deliberate process of selection, in order to express that whole within a play” (“Disrupting the Spectacle” 23). This whole within *Magnificence* revolves around Jed and the exchange between Babs and Alice in the fourth scene increase the effect of the last scene where Jed kills Alice and himself and the clash of the different worlds come to its climax. Moreover, as Reinelt asserts, “the stylistic differences of the scenes provide structural focus for the confrontation of two polarized social groups” (“Bertolt Brecht” 48). The style and language used in the preceding scene with Alice and Babs reinforce the sense of difference between the worlds of Jed and Alice. Hence, their mutual lack of understanding in the last scene is also made evident structurally by Brenton. Moreover, as Richard Boon and Amanda Price assert, that perplexity of the characters

extends into the auditorium: the style of the scene is found by deliberately juxtaposing the two worlds of the characters, two versions of reality, and allowing them to ‘act off each other.’ The result is, in Brenton’s own phrase, the creation of a sense of ‘moral vertigo’ in the audience. The spectator is refused the possibility of reading the play as tragedy or as comedy: it is both, or neither. (641)

Hence, these stylistic differences are used deliberately to aid the expression of the message in the whole of the play and through these diversities in the scenes, the readers/audiences are distanced from the actions in the play and urged to draw their own conclusions.

Furthermore, within the episodic structure of the play, “Brenton’s tale is tied together by the narrative link of Jed’s history” (Soto-Morettini 84). Brenton reflects a change in Jed’s character in *Magnificence*, which is also aided by the play’s structure. In his epic theatre, Brecht “used a type of montage approach, juxtaposing relatively autonomous scenes” so as to reflect his view that individuals are shaped by the social forces and they in turn are able to change them (Mumford 81). Likewise, Brenton uses the episodic structure in *Magnificence* to reveal that it is the mistreatment towards Jed and the effects of the social forces over him that forces him to engage in the act of terrorism. Jed is among the most silent and passive characters of the play in the first scene. He works hard for the success of the squat. His fall begins when Slaughter kills his baby; he is imprisoned for nine months and gets addicted to drugs in prison. When he meets with Will for the first time after his release, the worlds of the two characters are juxtaposed since Will, too, has changed as he became subdued because of the everyday concerns within the capitalist system at the time. At face value, Jed’s motivation for planning a terrorist attack seems to be psychological as he gets out of prison filled with anger and revenge. Yet, there are also some underlying factors that lead to his action which are, in fact, related with the society rather than individual psychology. By using an episodic structure and creating links between Jed’s story and non-linear episodic scenes, Brenton tries to stress this fact.

Another Brechtian device employed by Brenton in *Magnificence* is the direct audience address. One of the uses of direct audience address in plays that employ an episodic structure is to give the reader/audience some background information on the action which happened offstage and provide a context for the following scene. In the third scene which marks the end of the first half of the play, Jed summarises the first half of the play in a direct address to the audience: “We took over an empty house. Talked of liberating it for the poor. We were innocents. Bailiffs broke in, beat us up. My wife was with child. They booted her, my wife’s beautiful baby bulging tummy, booted. She lost the child” (69-70). Here, Jed reveals his take on the actions which just happened on stage. After that, Jed relates his state during his time in prison and after his release, and his words indicate the change in his character. These sections are not presented in the episodes of the play and they are also related with a direct address. In a similar way, Will gives an account of what happened before they arrive at Alice’s house in an aside

at the beginning of the last scene (96). These direct addresses provide relevant information for the scenes and fill the gaps that are left by the episodic structure of the play. Asides are also used constantly in the fourth scene to reflect the inner thoughts of Babs and Alice. These serve to create a comic effect and interrupt the action in order to remind the reader/audience of the theatricality of the play.

Apart from these, *Magnificence* also includes a short play within-a-play sequence in the fifth scene where Jed meets his friends and wife Mary for the first time after his release; however he does not show any response to Mary's callings as Vladimir Lenin appears on stage in a dream-like passage:

...  
 MARY. Jed.  
*A pause. Uncertain.*  
 Jed?  
*And the stage floods with red, awash with banners and songs.*  
 JED. Vlad?  
*The effects growing.*  
 Vlad?  
 LENIN *appears at the back of the stage. He moves through his heroic gestures. A wind machine blows a gale across the stage. MARY, CLIFF, and V stand stock still through this passage.*  
 What do you make of it, Vladimir Ilyich? (84)

Amidst the profound use of theatrical devices such as lights, songs and props, "the stage becomes Jed's mind, his fantasy, his obsession" and with the introduction of Lenin into the scene, "the internal, private argument becomes external and public" (Boon, *Brenton: The Playwright* 90). Lenin makes some remarks on revolutionary discourse and leaves but his language is not comprehensible to Jed as he exclaims: "Yeh but, Vlad. (*Spreads his arms, mockingly.*) What can a poor boy do?" (85). With these words, this short passage ends and the other characters get back to action. Boon claims that passages "like these go beyond the exploration of an individual's psyche: they become the means of invoking wider issues of history and politics, of fusing past and present, public and private, into a single theatrical reality" (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 256). The inclusion of a political figure from the past reinforces the scene's association with historical, political and social issues and constrains a psychological interpretation from the reader/audience which is one of the most significant tenets of Brechtian drama. Moreover, such sequences "are characterised by a daring theatricality which seeks a powerful, even

bewildering impact on the audience” (Boon, *Brenton: The Playwright* 91) and this impact aids in creating the desired A-effect in the reader/audience.

In terms of lighting, Brenton’s technique generally drifts away from the Brechtian norms. According to Boon and Price, Brenton “sought to challenge the then-dominant Royal Court tradition of a ‘cool,’ ‘neutral’ white-lit bare stage as it had been developed by the established directors and lighting designers” (640). The Royal Court tradition, established under the leadership of William Gaskill, was more compliant with the Brechtian theatre with its bright white stage. In *Magnificence*, Brenton tries to use lighting in a more expressive way and in accordance with the needs of each scene. In *Magnificence*, the “use of blackouts signals not simply the structural division between scenes, but a possible transformation of the space itself” (Boon, *Howard Brenton* 254). Lighting is used to imply the transitions between the private and public spaces in the play. In Jed’s closing audience address in the third scene, lights are used to create an “effect of sudden negating and X-ray” (68) at first when he is mentioning the results of the bailiffs’ break in, however, when he starts to reflect his own situation and feelings, the lights go down and a spot comes on him (70) “to focus audience attention on the internal workings of [Jed’s] mind, his ‘internal space, internal thoughts’” (Boon, *Brenton: The Playwright* 90). Likewise, in his sequence with Lenin in the fifth scene, the lights are used to signal the transition of place on stage. Although not exactly used in the Brechtian sense in most of the play, the changes in the lighting urge the reader/audience to look at the play from different perspectives. However, in Brechtian vein, the fourth scene with the Tory cabinet members and the concluding scene of the play use a bright stage with “lights up all over the stage” up until the point of explosion of the gelignite, where a brief blackout happens. Hence, Brenton chooses to fully illuminate the stage in a Brechtian way in the last scene which is the most crucial for the response of the reader/audience.

As for props and décor, the set in the first half of the play, especially the interior of the house with the squat is somewhat naturalistic except the cartoonish second scene which takes place outside the derelict house and in which the exchange between the bailiff and the Constable happen, and where Brenton simply uses a painted drop cloth to display the street. One of the important items of the first half of the play is the window through



which the squatters enter the house. In the stage directions, Brenton stresses that the window has to be “real glass” and the breakage of that window signifies Brenton’s own disruption of the spectacle, his infiltration of an established venue from the fringe. It could also be a reference to the play’s troublesome history up until the point of production as it was stated at the beginning of this chapter. In contrast to the first half, the whole of the second half of the play utilises a bare stage which complies with the Brechtian understanding of minimalistic stage.

The last device that is used in a Brechtian way in *Magnificence* is music. Music is one of the least used devices in the play and is only encountered in several scenes. All the music in the play comes from offstage, which is not in accordance with the Brechtian standard that the technical aspects of a play should not be concealed from the audience. Even so, music usually achieves the function of an A-effect when it is used. In the third scene, for instance, Jed’s last direct address is constantly interrupted by blows of a drum and the actors stamping (68-69). This interrupts the flow of his speech and thus creates an A-effect. In Brechtian theatre, music is also used to create contrasts with the action on the stage, again in order to create the desired A-effect on the audience. In the fourth scene of *Magnificence*, “*a languid musical scale on a xylophone*” accompanies Babs’s long monologue where he talks about their political and personal histories including their homosexuality and angrily accuses Alice of being a fascist (78-80). Here, the mood of the music does not amplify the tone of the scene but acts against it, which creates an A-effect.

Brenton uses Brechtian devices in *Magnificence* to illustrate his view on the state of leftist people who are disillusioned and perplexed by the aftermath of the May 1968 events, and to create a debate around the proper ways of political activism. By using contradictions in his characterisation and an episodic structure, Brenton urges his reader/audience to evaluate situations from different perspectives and in light of the underlying social forces. In addition to these devices Brenton uses direct audience address, play within-a-play and music to interrupt the flow of the action, and thus, creates an A-effect. Lastly, besides these, with the help of lighting and Brechtian stage design, Brenton tries to evoke a critical response from the reader/audience.

*Magnificence* is Brenton's first full-scale play in the established theatre, thus enabling the writer's transition from a fringe background into the mainstream. As Peter Ansorge asserts, the "magnificent point about *Magnificence* was that it created a real talking point among its audiences. Writers, directors and actors who had previously been confined to small-scale shows in tiny environments began to measure the possibilities of working in a large theatre — of reaching wider audiences" ("Green Room" 19). In this sense, this play is not only significant in Brenton's career but is also a milestone in contemporary British theatre. For Brenton, the success behind *Magnificence* also secured his place in the established theatre as it led Sir Peter Hall to commission a future play that would be staged at the National Theatre. With *Magnificence*, Brenton brought both his political arguments and stylistic experimentations into the mainstream. What Brenton accomplished with *Magnificence* is "a matter of evolving a new theatricality from the immediacy, the intimacy and the fierceness of the Fringe; of expanding and enriching characterisation, style and stagecraft to fill the physical, social and moral space of the larger established theatre" (Boon, *Brenton: The Playwright* 91). While doing that, the technical resources provided by the Royal Court allowed Brenton to become more expressive and free in designing his play. This, in turn enabled Brenton to further adopt Brechtian theatrical devices to deliver his intended messages to the reader/audience. Although *Magnificence* is not a play without mistakes, which Brenton himself admits, it is the play that enabled the boosting of Brenton's career as his plays came to be performed in larger venues with greater technical resources where he could stage full-scale epic plays like *The Romans in Britain*.

## CHAPTER 3

### HISTORICISATION IN *THE ROMANS IN BRITAIN*

*The Romans in Britain*<sup>1</sup> was commissioned by the National Theatre's artistic director Sir Peter Hall in 1977 and it took three years and three drafts for Brenton to complete the play. The play's preview began on 13 October 1980 and it opened officially on the main Olivier stage of the National Theatre on 16 October with Michael Bogdanov as its director, and it was one of the most prominent plays of the period. In fact, the play became part of "a controversy unprecedented in British theatre since the premiere of Ibsen's *Ghosts* nearly a hundred years before" (Boon, "Retreating to the Future" 329). The controversy was due to a brief sequence of a single scene, which simulated the homosexual rape of a Celtic druid by a Roman soldier, but it created an immense furore and eventually led to a prosecution for the play's director Bogdanov which will be detailed later in this chapter. Despite this fact, the play was ceaselessly on run on the Olivier stage until 24 March 1981 with a total of twenty-six performances (Rosenthal, *Dramatic Exchanges* 174). However, mainly due to the prosecution and its inconclusive result and further threats of prosecution, the play could not be revived even by amateur groups for a long time. The play got its "first amateur production in November in 1989 in Cambridge at the ADC Theatre" which was again reported to the police by the initiator of the original prosecution, Mrs Mary Whitehouse, but no action was taken (Roberts, "The Trials of *The Romans*" 69).

*The Romans* received its first and only professional revival twenty-five years after the original production. The play opened its run at Sheffield's Crucible Theatre on 2 February 2006 as a directorial debut for Samuel West (Hensher n. pag.). When asked whether he decided to stage *The Romans* for the controversy surrounding the original production, West gave "no" as an answer and mentioned the contemporariness of the play: "I think *Romans* is a very good play and I think it's part of theatre's duty to look again at unjustly neglected works. Its calibre has been eclipsed to a ludicrous extent by that scandal. It talks about issues that are very much in the air" ("*The Romans*" n. pag.). In another interview, West commented on the controversial reception of the original

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<sup>1</sup> The play will be abbreviated as *The Romans* hereafter.

production and made clearer the contemporary parallels that his production of the play would highlight:

What seemed to offend people was that there was a naked man simulating a male rape on the stage of the National Theatre. What may be closer to the truth is that a very gifted writer was choosing to employ the story of Britain's invasion by the Romans to draw a parallel between Roman imperialism and our invasion of Northern Ireland, and by implication nowadays our invasion of Afghanistan or Iraq or Grenada or any number of misguided attempts at establishing an empire. ("Emily Stokes Asks" 8)

After twenty-five years, Brenton saw his play as "not an experiment any more – it's just a play, though still ambitious" and shared similar views with West about the contemporary value of the play ("Look Back in Anger" n. pag.). *The Romans*'s first major production after its initial run lasted until 25 February at the Sheffield Crucible.

The initial conception of *The Romans* came out of an unlikely alliance between the National Theatre's artistic director, Peter Hall, who was ostensibly an establishment figure and was knighted during the pre-production stage of the play, and Brenton, who "had been categorised by theatre critics as a Marxist" (Lawson n. pag.). Just before the opening of his *Weapons of Happiness* at the National Theatre in 1976, Brenton wrote a letter to Hall, who "had already promised him another commission," claiming he had "a monstrous idea for a play" (Rosenthal, *Dramatic Exchanges* 174). Brenton's intention with this play was to draw a parallel between the contemporary British presence in Northern Ireland with previous periods of invasion of Britain by the Romans and Saxons. Both Brenton and Hall were "energised by the ease with which the British public and politicians accepted the presence of the British army in Northern Ireland" (Lawson n. pag.). The staging of such a play was a bold attempt in itself as the subject of Northern Ireland was an issue "that, with the notable exception of the 'outsiders' John Arden and Margaret D'Arcy, had been largely avoided by modern British political dramatists" (Peacock, *Radical Stages* 129). This fact was one of the most significant motivators for the parties as even Hall, being a figure close to the establishment, "regarded the lack of plays about Ireland as one of the failures of late 20th-century British theatre" (Lawson n. pag.).

Brenton's "monstrous idea" was to devise a two-part play in which he juxtaposed the colonial history of Britain and the contemporary situation in Northern Ireland

(Rosenthal, *Dramatic Exchanges* 175). To conceive a play of such magnitude that depicted different timelines and diverse cultures and tied them to the message of the play, Brenton had to have a notable grasp of history and thus he spent some considerable time for research. In fact, as Boon notes, “of all his work [*The Romans*] was the most heavily and thoroughly researched” (*Brenton: The Playwright* 181). The writing process of the play took three years, through three different versions and it was a “most difficult undertaking,” according to Brenton (Preface. *Plays*: 2 viii). Brenton had been in contact with Hall throughout the writing process of the play. Even in the earlier stages, Hall claimed the play had “enormous potential” (Rosenthal, *Dramatic Exchanges* 175). While working on *The Romans*, Brenton also finished his adaptation of Brecht’s *The Life of Galileo*, which too, was staged at the National Theatre in 1980. This also enabled Brenton to more fully adapt Brechtian techniques into *The Romans* as he gained valuable insight on these through the adaptation process. When the writing process and the preparations for the production were finally over, the result was a big play which Brenton was “immensely proud of” (Preface. *Plays*: 2 x).

As Brenton’s *The Romans* was epic in scale, it required some significant resources for its performance. The play includes over sixty characters, which were played by thirty actors in the original production. Hence, from a production standpoint, *The Romans* was not a play that could be performed by many theatres: “Aesthetically, no *alternative* company could have matched its scenographic scale and complexity; politically, few other *mainstream* theatres would have dared to take the legal risks involved in its explicit portrayal of buggery as a metaphor for the British occupation of Northern Ireland” (Kershaw, “Alternative Theatres” 349). It was the National Theatre and its artistic director Sir Peter Hall that provided these resources and opportunity for the production of the play. Even so, some of the board members of the National Theatre were not so supportive in putting the play into the repertoire either due to their belief that although being overly scandalous, the play did not possess the quality to be performed at the National Theatre, or due to their fear of cuts in subsidy, particularly from the Greater London Council (GLC), because of the play’s controversial rape scene and subject matter. Hall was aware of such danger and he had warned the board beforehand that the play could prove controversial (Rosenthal, *Dramatic Exchanges* 177).

The fuss around the play began even at the rehearsal period. The third scene, that is the rape scene, was performed during the rehearsals as it would be performed when the play would be staged and the involved actor decided to use his thumb to represent an erect penis which caused some trouble with the staff of the National Theatre who, at one point, refused to work for the play and this unrest was eventually heard by Peter Hall (Lawson n. pag.). The play's director Michael Bogdanov attempted to resolve the issue by holding an open rehearsal to those who were interested, which became successful in that the watching crowd gave a standing ovation after the play ended, however, this gave the crew "a false impression of the play's likely reception" (Lawson n. pag.).

The first public preview of the play took place on 13 October 1980. On the day of the preview, the National Theatre board discussed the sequence in Part One, Scene Three which they were concerned about and decided to continue with the performance (Roberts, "The Trials of *The Romans*" 59). The preview allowed several Tory political figures, including Sir Horace Cutler of the GLC, to attend the play before its official opening. Sir Cutler left the play before the interval and sent a telegram to Hall on 16 October, the day of the play's premiere, in which he proclaimed the play "a disgrace to the National Theatre. Its staging shows a singular lack of judgment on your part. [...] I have no doubt that the GLC will be considering its position vis-à-vis the National Theatre at an early date" (Rosenthal, *Dramatic Exchanges* 177). Hall defended his decision to stage *The Romans* yet he also made sure that the play could not be prosecuted under the 1968 Theatres Act (Roberts, "The Trials of *The Romans*" 60).

The play officially opened on 16 October and it "provoked as much harsh criticism and heated debate as any play since *Saved* (1965)" (Bolar 207-208). There was an upheaval in the media, with headlines such as "'This disgrace to our National Theatre,' 'Fury over new sex play' and 'Police move over sadism play'" (Boon, *Brenton: The Playwright* 173-74). All of this publicity had a positive impact in terms of box-office, however it also initiated a very troublesome process when it got the attention of Mary Whitehouse, the secretary of the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association. Fearing that the play might lead men to "commit attack on young boys," she first sent a solicitor to watch the play in her stead, then tried to pursue a public prosecution, and when that failed instigated a private prosecution on the play's director Bogdanov under the 1956

Sexual Offences Act, which was designed to prevent public homosexual relationships (Lawson n. pag.). Bogdanov “was prosecuted privately for procuring and being party to, ‘the commission by a man of an act of gross indecency with another man.’ The penalty for this could be up to two years in prison and an unlimited fine” (Peacock, *Thatcher’s Theatre* 71). The trial began on 15 March 1982, when the play was no longer in production. The controversy which made the support from the artistic director of the National Theatre such important and which also vaguely affected the reception of the play also became a highly significant matter for the future of the British theatre with the trial as it could open up ways for prohibiting the production of the plays that included scenes similar to the rape scene in *The Romans*. When the case was proving to be positive for the prosecution, counsel for the prosecution, Ian Kennedy, surprisingly informed the defendants that he did not wish to continue with the case, and the trial ended with a *nolle prosequi*, which means ‘unwilling to prosecute’ (Roberts, “The Trials of *The Romans*” 66-67).

Both sides initially claimed victory after the trial. It was not the desired outcome for the defendants; the play was still liable to prosecution and there was not any amendment to the law (Boon, *Brenton: The Playwright* 178). Bogdanov, who had faced “threatening phone calls, excrement through his letterbox and the bullying of his children at school” throughout the prosecution process (Lawson n. pag.), claimed that he was upset because he was denied to prove his case (qtd. in Rosenthal, *The National Theatre Story* 349). Brenton had been mostly silent throughout the process, however he was much obliged to Bogdanov who endured all the negativities on his behalf and “never complained, he was throughout the madness fiercely loyal to the work and quite prepared to go to gaol, knowing all along that it was merely a quirk of the law that stopped Mrs Whitehouse getting the author into the dock, rather than him” (Preface. *Plays: 2 x*). The support of the National Theatre’s artistic director, Hall, during the points of crisis before and throughout the production and during the eventual prosecution of the play was also immensely valuable for both Brenton and the play’s history. Brenton described his appreciation in a letter, thanking Hall for his “rock hard commitment to *The Romans* during its production and the brouhaha. You have always been straight with me” (qtd. in Rosenthal, *Dramatic Exchanges* 180).

The critical reception of the play was also affected by certain controversies. The upheaval around the play led only to the discussion of that particular scene, that is scene three, rather than the main subject of the play and its dramatic value. James Fenton wrote: “This play is a nauseating load of rubbish from beginning to end. It is written in a ludicrous pseudo-poetic yob-talk; such themes as it possesses are banal beyond belief; and the intended bravery of the acting company amounts to no more than an embarrassing exhibitionism” (qtd. in Mitchell 42). Reviewing the play for *The Guardian*, Billington found “a vast disproportion between the extravagance of the form and the banality of the thesis” (qtd. in Roberts, “Howard Brenton’s Romans” 6). Contrary to this, many playwrights –among whom Edward Bond wrote a lengthy article to defend the play– supported Brenton and the play during the upheaval but even they mentioned only the particular scene of the play and did not make any commentaries about its overall quality. There were also some critics who objectively analysed the play’s content, and among them were some who found the play successful. For instance, Bernard Levin claimed that “*The Romans in Britain* is a very good play indeed. [...] Conjuring up an era that is culturally as well as historically remote is a notoriously difficult task for a playwright or novelist, but Mr. Brenton achieves it with great skill and effect” (qtd. in Mitchell 47). In terms of revenue, despite or maybe due to the controversy, the play was highly successful in terms of box-office (Roberts, “Howard Brenton’s Romans” 7).

Brenton reveals the social background during the writing process of *The Romans* that influenced him as follows:

There was an edgy desperation in the late 1970s: the cold war was in deep freeze, the conflict in Ireland was escalating, the British Labour movement was tearing itself apart, and, in the streets, unemployed youth sported post-punk, multi-coloured mohican hairstyles. Inevitably, the play has echoes of that era. One of the young British Celts even talks of gelling his hair (very like the body of an Irish Celt recently discovered in Ireland). There was a sense of things beginning to fall apart. It’s marked how in many scenes people listen, trying to hear something in the trees, or strain to see something just out of sight, that is dangerous and coming for them. The play is shot through with premonitions that the unimaginable is about to happen. In a way it did: Margaret Thatcher arrived. (“Look Back in Anger” n. pag.)

Brenton notes the greatest difficulty he had when he began to write the play as a “weighty matter. It was what to do about a sense of overwhelming *sorrow*, a grief for the nameless dead, with which the material of the play is drenched. This is, itself,



difficult to express” (Preface. *Plays*: 2 x). Brenton himself tries to avoid the effects of humanism and liberalism within the dominant voice in the play, this is evident in the character of Chichester. In order to do so, he takes the late eighteenth-early nineteenth century poet William Blake’s ‘proverb from Hell’ as an example: ‘Drive your cart and plough over the bones of the dead’ and figures the necessity of showing humanity at its worst: “If you are not prepared to show humanity at its worst, why should you be believed when you show it at its best, in a play that attempts to do both in equal measure” (Preface. *Plays*: 2 x). The violent and graphic scenes in *The Romans* can be justified with Brenton’s this remark.

The first part of *The Romans*, titled “Caesar’s Tooth”, “takes place north of the River Thames on 27<sup>th</sup> August, 54 BC and the following dawn” (Brenton, *The Romans* 2). The first scene begins at night with two Irish refugees and criminals, Conlag and Dauí, who are on the run and were lost in the forests for three days. They come across a farm and decide to sleep there. In the second scene, Conlag wakes up to find a slave girl of Celts staring at him. He wakes Dauí up and just as they plan to kill her, three foster brothers, Brac, Marban and Viridio enter, playing ball, and the criminals hide. Marban, who is a druid, notices them, learns of their criminal background and slits Dauí’s throat. Conlag runs away and Marban pours Dauí’s blood on to the ground as a blessing. Just as the brothers begin to chase Conlag, Mother enters with some villagers and two envoys from another tribe called Cassivellaunus. Envoys warn the Mother and her tribe about the approaching Roman threat but Mother acts as if she does not believe them and sends them away. In fact, another envoy from an allied tribe, Trinovantes, had informed Mother that they made an agreement and will not fight the Romans; hence her tribe becomes a part of the alliance as well. With the infamous third scene, the story returns to the foster brothers who are now resting near a river bank during their hunt for Conlag. Three Roman soldiers who are separated from the rest of their army and want a swim emerge from the forest. They fatally wound Brac, kill Viridio and knock Marban unconscious after the third soldier sexually violates him. As Marban becomes conscious again, the second soldier saves his life by clearing phlegm from Marban’s mouth. But the second soldier becomes belligerent once he learns Marban can speak Latin as the realisation of Marban’s ability to communicate leads the soldier to understand “he is faced with more than a ‘thing’” (Boon, *Brenton: The Playwright* 194). The fourth scene

reveals Conlag's flight where he meets the slave girl. They are joined by the villagers who are escaping from the Roman attack. The fifth scene returns to the river -bank with the bodies of Brac and Viridio. In the meantime, Julius Caesar is imposing order in his army as it is learnt that the attack on Mother's village was the work of a stray troop. Caesar issues the assassination of the responsible commander and releases Marban after tying a pendant of Venus around his neck. Caesar's historian Asinus reveals the reason of their invasion as "fresh water pearls," which underlines the fact that Caesar's expedition was merely for economic reasons. When the Celts suddenly attack with stones from the trees, Caesar orders his troops to retreat. In the sixth scene, the villagers find Marban who tells them that they will never forget the fear the Romans struck in them and that they should abandon the old ways and then he commits suicide. In the last scene of the first part, Conlag and the slave girl are at the north bank of the Thames. With a stone, the slave kills Conlag, whom she says had raped her in the forest. Then, the sound of an approaching helicopter is heard and the Roman army, Caesar and his staff re-arrive, this time with modern British army uniforms. The slave throws a stone at one of the soldiers and, in turn, is shot with an automatic weapon by a soldier who sees her as a terrorist in an Irish field.

The second part of the play, which is titled "Arthur's Grave" "takes place in Britain in 515 AD and in Ireland in 1980 AD" (58). In the first scene, a British undercover army officer Thomas Chichester waits for the IRA leader O'Rourke in a field at the Irish border. Soon, a British army patrol spots Chichester and takes him for an Irishman. Chichester asks Corporal for an officer, and Lieutenant Bob Maitland, who happens to be Chichester's old regimental friend, arrives. Chichester relates his operation to Maitland, then the army patrol leaves. Chichester lies down and dozes on stage just as the second scene begins as part of his dream. The second part of the play follows this pattern as the scenes shift between time and place, dream and reality through Chichester's dreams about the past. The second scene depicts 515 AD where an old man, Cai, is warned by some villagers and a priest about the incoming Saxon raid and he is urged by the villagers to join them in their flight towards Camulodunum. Cai rejects joining them and chooses to stay at the place he was born as he buries an idol in the ground. While Cai is still on stage, the third scene reveals Chichester, who seems to be gradually losing his mind, talking to himself as if he is talking with a superior.

Chichester still on stage, the fourth scene returns to 515 AD, Cai's daughters Corda and Morgana spot a wounded Saxon soldier entering their field, whom Cai kills. Since Cai is insistent on not leaving his fields, Corda kills him with a stone and she runs away into the forest with Morgana. In the fifth scene, an Irish woman, Chichester's contact with O'Rourke, wakes Chichester up. Chichester tries to hasten the meeting with O'Rourke before she leaves, and Chichester once again falls asleep. In the sixth scene, Chichester dreams a group of refugees who are similar to the Irish refugees in the beginning of the play: Adona, a Roman matron, her steward and two cooks. It is revealed that Adona carries the plague, and the cooks run off. Left alone with her mistress, the steward robs and kills her. In the seventh scene O'Rourke and Chichester finally meet. Chichester blows his cover and reveals his true identity. He reveals that his mission was to assassinate O'Rourke, however his real intention was to confess the British crimes and act like King Arthur. Chichester's words do not move the opposing party or even seem offensive to them, particularly to the woman, hence Chichester is shot. Even though Chichester is dead, the last scene of the play returns to the narrative in 515 AD. Corda and Morgana arrive at the field with the corpses of their father and the dead Saxon to salvage them. Their arrival is followed by the appearance of the two cooks who also come to the field to salvage the corpse of their mistress Adona. There, two groups see each other and decide to band together. One of the cooks decides to change his profession and become a poet. The play ends with the creation of his first poem about a king, who they name Arthur.

Brenton's choice of title for the play has several uses. First, it sets Britain as a remote setting for Brenton's main discourse which is about the British presence in Ireland. As it is suggested from the title of the play, instead of using Ireland as a setting, Brenton "opts for a grand epic sweep from, in Part I, England on the brink of Roman invasion in 54 BC, to, in Part II, England on the brink of Saxon invasion in 515 AD" (Bull, *New British Political Dramatists* 204). The title also aids Brenton to make the link between past colonial invasions and the contemporary Irish situation. As Peacock asserts, the "suggestion of alien intrusion embodied in the play's title and illustrated in its first part is paralleled in the second by a reference to the alien presence of English troops in contemporary Northern Ireland as akin to that of spacemen on the moon" (*Radical*

*Stages* 132). Hence, Brenton's choice of title establishes the background for the main issues that he discusses in the play.

In *The Romans*, Brenton handles the issues of imperialism, colonisation, identity, cultural oppression, war, history and myth. Robert Leach describes the play as a “post-colonial epic” where Brenton dramatises colonial oppression “with direct reference to Ireland” (*Theatre Studies* 54). Brenton uses two different periods in time during which Britain was under invasion by imperial forces and relates those to the contemporary British presence in Ireland. *The Romans* “offers its audience a succession of images of this colonisation, with all its resultant brutality, as a way of approaching, at a tangent, the particular problems caused by the English occupation of Ireland” (Bull, *New British Political Dramatists* 204). While doing so, Brenton uses land itself as a character to enhance his argument around the contemporary situation in Ireland, which Anthony P. Pennino reveals with references to the theories of A. H. Halsey and Edward Said as follows:

Brenton's drama finds itself at the intersection of Said and Halsey's theoretical concerns. Romans legions, SAS operatives, and Celtic refugees intermingle on three interchangeable fields. For Said, imperialism is rooted in the acquisition of territory, and cultural imperatives develop as a result of that acquisition. Halsey demonstrates that the nature of the land itself serves as a kind of societal DNA wherein information concerning heritage, identification, culture, and ideology is transmitted by means of the conduit of geography. Events of pre- and post-Roman Britain inform the present; the Roman conquest tells us something immediate about the Troubles in the North of Ireland. (91)

The connection between the past and the present is made by revealing the presence of imperialism in different epochs by drawing parallels between the previous imperialist invasions of Britain and the contemporary British presence in Ireland.

While delving into these issues, Brenton also uses a Situationist approach. Situationist theory led to a “whole new formal aesthetic of shock for political theatre in Britain during the 1970s, one which reworked the fundamental dislocation of Brecht's alienation effect for a new political circumstance” (G. White 331). Brenton continues to rely on Situationist tactics and Brechtian devices in *The Romans* in relation to the issue of Northern Ireland and “to the historical myths that contributed to the perpetuation of its problems” –just as he did for the issue of potential socialist revolution in the 1970s– with the aim to shock the audience (Peacock, *Radical Stages* 128). *The Romans* has

plenty of scenes, such as the notorious rape scene and the ending of the first part, which have the power to create a cultural shock in the reader/audience. With these scenes and the play's attacks on liberalism "Brenton attempts to 'disrupt the spectacle' of Englishness and its images" (Rylance 129). This Situationist tactics gain more significance when the venue the play is produced in, the National Theatre, with its middle-class audience and the widespread media coverage of its events is considered.

Aside from the Situationist attitudes in the play, Pennino claims that Brenton's Brechtian approach in putting the past and the present under thorough and careful examination points at his "overlaying his role of artist with that of historical materialist" (93). Pennino draws on Walter Benjamin's understanding that a work of art could not be isolated from its history and evaluated on its own, and argues that Brenton does the same in his play by seeing British identity as a work of art and "juxtaposing two contradictory images to evaluate—and to prompt the audience to evaluate—the journey of the nation itself, its imperial heritage, from past to present" (93). In the same work, Pennino quotes Benjamin's words on the role of the historical materialist which is to explode "the epoch out of its 'historical continuity'" (Benjamin 29). By using historicisation in an episodic structure and juxtaposing different periods of the past and the present, Brenton breaks the "historical continuity" of the British identity and displays it in a new light.

The use of Brechtian devices then, lies at the heart of Brenton's strategy in *The Romans* to deliver his messages to the reader/audience. The most prevalently used Brechtian device in *The Romans* is historicisation. Reinelt asserts that as "a socialist committed to change," Brenton is similar to Brecht as both want to reveal "that history is a product of situation and choice"; and by looking at the extreme reaction from the press and some 'pillars of society' towards the play, it could be said that Brenton succeeded in historicising the events (*After Brecht* 24-25).

In *The Romans* Brenton uses two past epochs, –Britain in 54 BC, before the Roman invasion; and Britain in 515 AD, before the Saxon invasion– to make comments on the contemporary British presence in Northern Ireland in 1980. *The Romans* is "essentially a version of the Brechtian epic, contemporized and sharpened by a Situationist/Surrealistic juxtaposition of historical periods to throw light upon a current

political situation” (Peacock, *Thatcher’s Theatre* 69). Before continuing with the analysis of the use of historicisation in the play, it would be beneficial to give a historical background of the contemporary Irish situation. The events that led to the creation of two separate Irish states in Britain can be summarised as follows:

Northern Ireland was created in the 1920s as a by-product of a guerrilla war waged by the Irish Republican Army or IRA (who sought to create an Irish Republic) and a counterinsurgency campaign waged by the British government and its agents in Ireland (who wanted Ireland, and later, just its Northeast corner, to remain a part of the United Kingdom). The Government of Ireland Act (1920) established independent parliaments in Dublin, for the Irish Free State (declared a Republic in 1949), and in Belfast, for Northern Ireland. The Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921) formalized the partition of Ireland, and from this point until August 1969, there was relatively little involvement by the British government in London in the affairs of the Northern Irish government. (White and White 334)

The conflict in Northern Ireland arose from the religious tensions between the Catholics and Protestants. In the 1960s the Catholic minority of Northern Ireland, which consisted of “roughly one third of the population” and “had suffered systematic discrimination since the foundation of the state,” began protesting and was met with resistance from the local police force and the Protestant community, which consisted of “roughly two thirds of the population” and made their own counter demonstrations (White and White 334). Up to August 1969, large scale and violent demonstrations ensued between these two groups and finally British troops intervened as peacekeepers and since then violence has been committed by paramilitaries and forces around these three parties, namely: the Provisional Irish Republican Army and other Republican/Nationalist paramilitaries whose goal was to “force the British out of Northern Ireland and to reunite the province with the Irish Republic”; Protestant/Loyalist paramilitaries who opposed “the Republican paramilitaries and [sought] to maintain Northern Ireland’s position within the United Kingdom”; and the state’s security forces (the British Army, the Royal Ulster Constables and the Royal Irish Rangers) who presented themselves as “peacekeepers trying to restore order” (R. White 576). The fighting among these groups “has taken more than 2,000 lives since 1968 [to 1981], wounded twelve times that many or more, and distorted children’s lives and all other aspects of the society more than can be estimated” (Lee 103). The presumption in the media and the British government was that there would be a bloodbath if the British did not intervene, however as it is observed through some considerable evidence that the “British soldiers and the Royal

Ulster Constabulary have functioned more as participants, the third side of a war, than as objective police” and peacekeepers (Lee 104). The conflict in Northern Ireland seemed to have ended in 1998, although violence did not completely cease.

Despite the thorough research on Brenton’s part that was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the accuracy of the history represented in the play had been a point of attack for the critics. However, as Philip Roberts asserts, “Brenton’s account of part of the early history of Britain is verified by the standard works on the period and that his selection of detail for dramatic purposes neither distorts history nor manufactures it” (“Howard Brenton’s Romans” 7). During his research, Brenton could only find “some thirteen accounts of the ancient Celts by classical authors” and it was staggering for him “to realize how thin the written record is, how rocky the pillars are upon which volumes of scholarship have been built” (Preface. *Plays*: 2 viii). Although Brenton admits there was some speculation in his account of the Celts as a consequence of the limited resources available, the result of his research and his attention to detail is evident in the play.

Brenton chooses not to hint at the contemporary connection until the end of the first part of the play, which takes place in 54 BC. Instead, the rather violent scenes present the issues that the play will handle and prepare the reader/audience for the time the contemporary links will emerge by laying the foundations of the parallels that Brenton will make in order to compose the overall message of the play. In the early stages of the play, Brenton introduces the Celtic society, not as civil people living in harmony, but as warlike people that are prone to violence. As Pennino states, Brenton chooses not to sentimentalise ancient peoples of Britain as the feeling of nostalgia “is anathema to the oppositional history form” (89), and since not sentimentalising the incidents or the characters in the play prevents emotional identification of the reader/audience, Brenton’s approach can be considered Brechtian. Likewise, Sean Carney sees Brenton’s approach to past in *The Romans* as Brechtian, as he states the play serves “as a Brechtian example of ‘dialectical theatre,’ in that it is dialectical and liberating to see the past not as inert and foundational but as a series of inherited narratives that are to be employed as the material of a rewriting and re-inscription rather than to be collected in antiquarian fashion” (428). Brecht’s words on historicisation are relevant with this idea:

We must be able to characterize the field in historically relative terms. This means breaking with our habit of stripping the different social structures of past ages of everything that makes them different, so that they all look more or less like our own age, which then acquires from this process a certain air of having been there all along, in other words for all eternity. We, however, want them to retain their distinctiveness and wish to keep in mind their transience, so that our own age too can be construed as transient. (Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre* 240)

While reflecting peoples from different historical epochs, Brenton does not strip them of their respective social structure and retains their transience. For instance, when Marban learns of the religious and the criminal history of the exiles, Conlag and Dauí, he kills Dauí and uses his blood as a blessing without hesitation. The action here “is savage and horrifying, but is shown to be both correct and moral in terms of the codes and *mores* of the culture to which the young brothers belong” (Boon, *Brenton: The Playwright* 187). As Roberts asserts, “Brenton is not intent upon endorsing such savagery. He is, though, concerned to show how the strictures of law and proper behaviour, as determined by agreement, were observed by the members of such a society” (“Howard Brenton’s Romans” 10). There are many other examples of information about different aspects of Celtic society in the first half of the play, such as the maternal structure that is represented by Mother, the place of fosterage represented by Marban, Brac and Viridio, the traditional ball game they play, and Brenton uses these to “establish the normality of the community before disaster overtakes it” (Roberts, “Howard Brenton’s Romans” 9-10) and to represent important aspects of the social structure of Celtic people.

As Reinelt emphasises, the “relationship of past to present and future is the heart of the historicizing process” (*After Brecht* 25). Brenton makes the connection between past and present evident at the end of the first part of *The Romans*. In the last scene of the first part, after the slave kills Conlag, the setting of the play shifts to modern times with the arrival of the Roman army in modern British army apparel and with the sound of helicopters, hence invoking the contemporary issue in the play. As Boon stresses, it “is a breath-taking moment, a daring assertion that between Roman soldier and British there is no real difference bar technology, and that the British are as much invaders in Ireland as the Romans were in Britain” (*Brenton: The Playwright* 199). In the following action, the slave, who is now labelled “contact” by the soldiers, indifferently throws a stone at one of the soldiers, and is immediately shot by one soldier with an automatic weapon. By “calling attention to the parallel between the brutal Roman imposition of



their culture on Britain and similarly brutal imposition by the Protestants on Ireland, Brenton raises political issues about the interpretation of the past and, most important, proper conduct in the future” (Reinelt, *After Brecht* 25). Thus, with such an ending to the first part of the play, Brenton not only brings the contemporary issue of Ireland into the debate, but also urges the reader/audience to make a connection between the past and the present.

This scene also reveals the similarities of racism and imperialism throughout the epochs, which is also one of the universal issues dealt with in the play as seen from Brenton and West’s remarks on the revival of the play. The slave who was shot at the end of the first part is called as “[f]ucking bogshitting mick” (57) by the soldier who kills her. The racial slurs used on Celts such as “wog”, “niggers” and “nig nogs” become “mick” for the Irish. Hence, the colonial abuse applied to the Celts by the Romans turns into abuse addressed to the Irish by the British (Bull, *New British Political Dramatists* 205). Moreover, Brenton reveals that similar insults are still used by the British such as the joke Chichester tells to the corporal (Peacock, *Radical Stages* 131): “Why are Catholic tarts the best? Because they’ve got rhythm” (68). Celts themselves are also not devoid of this dehumanisation as they call their slaves “things” and use the pronoun “it” when they refer to them. Hence, regardless of their allegiance, the oppressors constantly dehumanise the oppressed by using derogatory and racist labels in the play. Besides, Caesar’s justification on the killing of the slave is an example of militarist and imperialist thought: “That everyday life will begin again. That violence will be reduced to an acceptable level. That civilisation may not sink, its great battle lost” (57). Thus, Brenton reveals that such justifications are used by imperialists all the time to provide a rationale for their violent actions, which is also applicable to the contemporary situation in Ireland. Peacock claims that the “ubiquitous myth of imperialism is that of racial superiority” and Brenton reveals motives behind imperialist myth-making throughout the play “to provoke the audience to consider that, in fact, it might be English myths concerning Northern Ireland which were, in part, responsible for inhibiting any resolution of its problems” (*Radical Stages* 129).

Hence, through historicisation, Brenton not only reveals territorial imperialism in *The Romans*, but cultural imperialism as well. Brenton symbolises this in one of the most

intense scenes of the play where three Roman soldiers who want to have a swim wade through three brothers in order to do so. After they murder Brac and Viridio, one of the soldiers talks about “empire” while another “attempts to bugger” Marban, in what is a shocking scene for the reader/audience. As “the second soldier tries to explain the concept of ‘empire’ to the semi-conscious Marban, the third soldier shows precisely what it means” (Boon, *Brenton: The Playwright* 194) by sexually violating him. Hence, it is evident, as Roberts indicates; Brenton had been precise in his creation of the scene:

It is a brilliant moment, deliberately designed to shock an audience into judgement. It would not have worked so powerfully if the object of the rape had been a woman and thus a confirmation for the audience that the received wisdom of how armies act does not need further exploration. Brenton is not interested in confirming prejudice but in forcing an audience to think. (“Howard Brenton’s Romans” 17)

Another aspect that makes the scene so powerful is the casualness of the Roman soldiers while committing their violent acts, which also constitutes an A-effect. Brenton remembers a talk with Edward Bond after a performance in which Bond stated that if the gags were removed from the play, it would be highly acceptable; and describes the situation as follows: “The backlash of the scene, what horrifies, is its casualness. The soldiers joke as they murder and bungle a rape. It’s obscene. I have never said anything other than that the scene is about a vile obscenity. I think it’s true to what happens in war. It’s so ... casual, light-hearted for the Romans – and suffering and death for the young Celts” (“The Red Theatre” 198). The incident becomes more significant when Marban’s status as a druid in the Celtic society is considered as it transforms the violation to an act of symbolic implications since “the third soldier’s assault [also] signifies the desecration of an entire culture” (Boon, *Brenton: The Playwright* 194). Brenton notes the background of the scene as follows: “I found in several controversial scenes in *The Romans in Britain* that what we were dramatizing was a colonizing army meeting a culture that just by meeting, it will destroy. The scene is actually called “The Two Worlds Touch,” and at that touch, one dies; the Celtic world dies” (“Selected Affinities” 46). Besides the universal issues related with cultural imperialism, when the contemporary parallels of the play are considered, the scene also becomes an allegory of British presence in Ireland.

In regards to cultural imperialism, Brenton also reflects the fluidity of national myths through his evaluation of the Arthurian legend with the use of historicisation in the play.

The British undercover officer Chichester reveals in a fit of conscience that Arthur was in fact a Celtic warrior and “re-establishe[s] the fact that the original Britons were, in fact, the Celts, and the invading Romans the forebears of the English race, which has surprising consequences for national mythology” (Rabey 150). This “had a disorienting effect for the National Theatre audience” (Rabey 150):

CHICHESTER. It's Celts we're fighting in Ireland. We won't get anywhere 'til we know what that means.

Look at this field. It's like one on my mother's farm, not far from Colchester. The Roman city of Camulodunum.

One Spring, ploughing, we found a God. That big. Celtic, pagan. And Camulodunum could be the site for Arthur's last battle. AD 515.

King Arthur! Celtic warlord. Who fought twelve great battles against the Saxons. That is, us.

MAITLAND. What are you talking about?

The Celts! Ha! Very fashionable, the Celts, with the arty-crafty. Ley-lines. Druids. But show them the real thing – an Irishman with a gun, or under a blanket in an H-block and they run a mile.

If King Arthur walked out of those trees, now – know what he'd look like to us? One more fucking mick. (66)

Here, Brenton not only associates the Irish with the Celts, and the Saxons with the British, but he also reveals that the British have also appropriated a Celtic warlord as their own for their national mythology. Roberts claims that “Chichester does not doubt the historical reality of Arthur and modern opinions support him in disputing the idea that Arthur was a figment of romance” (“Howard Brenton's Romans” 12). However, as Roberts further notes, a recent work by Leslie Alcock shows “that Arthur was not a king and unlike the warlords of the Germanic and Celtic heroic societies, he founded no dynasty. He was instead the leader of the combined forces of the small kingdoms into which sub-Roman Britain had dissolved” (359). Chichester does not question the historical validity of the Arthurian legend but merely points at the fact that they are fighting the Celts in Ireland, who were the real descendants of King Arthur. Hence, “besides imposing territorial imperialism upon Ireland, the English have also been guilty of cultural imperialism, exemplified by their appropriation of the Celtic hero, Arthur, for their own mythology” (Peacock, *Radical Stages* 131-32), and Brenton reveals this fact by providing links between the past and the present through historicisation.

In his speech, Chichester also references a contemporary issue related with Irish resistance, that is the blanket protests at Maze prison and the hunger strikes related to these in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The issues began when the republican prisoners losing their “special category status,” which gave them certain privileges, such as the right to wear their own clothes, free association with each other, and educational and recreational activities; and abstinence from penal labour (Smyth 182). Hence, the prisoners began a series of hunger strikes in 1980. The first hunger strike ended in December 1980 after the British government agreed to meet some of the demands of the prisoners; however the government reneged on their promises and adopted harsher protocols leading to a second strike which began in March 1981 became inevitable (Smyth 185, 189). This second hunger strike played an important part in the history of the Irish issue as it changed its course towards politics from violence. With the support they gained throughout the hunger strikes, the “Republicans complemented paramilitary activity with intervention in electoral contests, and the authorities in Northern Ireland, Britain, and the Irish Republic engaged in machinations designed to stem Republican political growth” (R. White 577). In *The Romans*, Brenton “returns Arthur to his Welsh/Breton roots and subversively equates him with the hunger strikers in the Maze. The result is clear. In stripping away nostalgia and heritage as the foundation of history, the play advocates for a more nuanced engagement with a contemporary political crisis” (Pennino 90). Hence, by invoking contemporary issues related to Ireland and with figures from Britain’s national mythology, Brenton urges the reader/audience to look at contemporary events in a new light.

*The Romans* is also abundant with instances of demythologisation which are also conveyed through historicisation in the play. Brenton claims that the arrival of the Romans is a rooted, popular myth in the British national consciousness and it is vaguely felt “to be ‘a good thing,’ because they built straight roads and ‘brought law’” (Preface. *Plays*: 2 vii). However, as Brenton reveals in the play, the Roman invasion demolished an entire culture. One of the other targets of this demythologisation in the play is the Roman army. The Roman army is presented as a source of awe and fear for those who have not seen them before. At the beginning of the play, Dauí describes the Roman army to the Celts as follows: “The sun shines out of their navels. Two navels. And big,

very big men. In metal. When they walk they clank” (13). The envoy’s depiction of the Roman army has a similar air:

The Roman Army moves through this island. A ship of horror. Smashing the woods and farms. Animals run before it.

...

They have come from the other side of the World. And they are one. One whole.

...

The Romans are different. They are – (He gestures, trying to find the word. He fails. He tries again.) A nation. Nation. What? A great family? No. A people? No. They are one, huge thing. (20)

Yet, the reality is quite different from these descriptions when the army first appears in the third scene with the three Roman soldiers who have gone astray. They torture, murder and rape the Celtic brothers in a jokingly fashion. Brenton stresses the importance of the casualness in the scene in revealing the incompetence of the warriors in his preface to the play: “My scene shocked many, for it is profoundly shocking. What is so hard to take is the flippancy of the soldiers, their jokey indifference, the fact that they ‘know not what they do’” (viii). Hence, the Roman army in this scene

is neither the mass of superbeings imagined by the Celts nor quite the invincible force of history-book and legend. Rather, Brenton foregrounds the arbitrariness of war and the ineptitude of the warriors, who when they are not raping and slaughtering young Celts are made to perform a less spectacular duty for Empire, the digging of toilets. (Ponnuswami, “Celts and Celticists” 75)

By emphasising the disorderly state of the Roman soldiers, Brenton also accomplishes to deconstruct the myth surrounding them. Thus, Brenton first shows the myths surrounding the Roman army just to debunk them later in the play. They are not the “big men in metal” or “one whole, huge thing.” They are merely human.

The effect of this scene continues when Caesar is seen for the first time in the play at the same location, with the corpses of the two brothers still present. Like the Roman army, its leader Caesar too, is quite different from his historical depictions as conqueror. As Zeifman argues, “[t]oo self-involved to register the carnage that surrounds him, Brenton’s demythologised Caesar is blithely indifferent to the cataclysm that has just occurred” (139-40). It is mentioned in the play that the whole invasion, which Caesar describes as “a squalid little raid” (44) “in a filthy backwater of humanity, somewhere near the edge of the world” (46), was undertaken for “[f]resh water pearls” (50). Hence the “Roman presence is demythologized as base economic colonialism” (Peacock,

*Thatcher's Theatre* 70). Brenton links the invasion to Caesar's tooth, which Caesar pulls out and throws away just before the invasion comes to an end (50-51), by naming both the scene and the first part of the play as "Caesar's Tooth" (2-3). As Zeifman aptly states "the invasion has been simply a minor irritant, an aching tooth easily yanked out and then thrown away, but for the Celts – and for the audience in the theatre – it has meant the wholesale destruction of an entire 'world'" (140). Brenton extends this parallel to the contemporary British presence in Ireland with the arrival of Caesar in contemporary British army apparel at the end of the first part of the play. Brenton's goal is to allow his reader/audience to see the contemporary situation in the light of imperialism and the coloniser/colonised image that is created with the presentation of a past invasion.

Besides demythologisation, Brenton also reveals the processes of myth-making in *The Romans* with the use of historicisation. As Philip Oakes states, throughout *The Romans*, Brenton successfully "describes legends and myths, rationalising their purpose without denying their magic" (qtd. in Peacock, *Radical Stages* 130). In the play, Caesar is always accompanied by his historian Asinus during the invasion and wants him to take notes for his "Official Biography" (46):

...  
 Once I was captured by pirates. Island fishermen really. I told them – when my ransom is paid, I will return and kill you.  
 My ransom was paid. I raised a fleet. I stormed their islands. I crucified them all, all their communities, twenty thousand of them, men women and children! Wooded islands. The crosses took all the trees. The islands will be rock and turf for ever. A logic. I walked in forests as a captive. Free, the same ground had to be barren plain. One extreme the mother of the opposite extreme. (47)

Here, Caesar writes his own history in his own words and decorates it with rhetoric to make it more appealing. What is perceived from his representation in the play, however, is in open contrast to his words. Even his own historian, Asinus, sees him for what he really is: "He is a man waiting on the edge of the world. For what? In a sense, he does nothing. He only reacts. And finds himself master of continents. It is not surprising that he pays historians to find omens of great things at the time of his birth" (50). Hence, by portraying Caesar as a leader far from the myths revolving around him, Brenton juxtaposes myth with reality.

In another similar instance, Chichester mythologises “Irish history as ‘tragedy’ in front of two members of the IRA” (Peacock, *Thatcher’s Theatre* 70) as he confesses to the man he had to assassinate:

I keep on seeing the dead. A field in Ireland, a field in England. And faces like wood. Charred wood, set in the ground. Staring at me.  
 The faces of our forefathers.  
 Their eyes are sockets of rain-water, flickering with gnats. They stare at me in terror.  
 Because in my hand there’s a Roman spear. A Saxon axe. A British Army machine-gun.  
 The weapons of Rome, invaders, Empire.  
 ...  
 The weapons. I want to throw them down.  
 And reach down. To the faces. Hold the burnt heads in my hands and pull them up.  
 The bodies out of the earth. Hold them against me.  
 Their bones of peat and water and mud. And work them back to life.  
 Like King Arthur –. (89-90)

What might seem as plausible self-criticism and a plea for peace is in fact an offense to the IRA members as it removes the responsibility of the British in relation to the Irish issue and reduces the Irish situation to a mere tragedy. Declan Kiberd remarks the irony of the situation: the “well-intentioned Englishman who thinks that he might be part of the solution turns out to be part of the problem” (qtd. in Ponnuswami, “Celts and Celticists” 82). For this reason, Chichester’s romantic humanism is not the answer to Ireland’s troubles. The “confrontation between Chichester and O’Rourke thus enacts not only the conflict between empire and native but also the uneasy relationship between the English liberal and Irish nationalism” (Ponnuswami, “Celts and Celticists” 82). The reaction of the Irish woman debunks Chichester’s myth and situates history in a new light:

What right does he have to stand in a field in Ireland and talk of the horrors of war? What nation ever learnt from the sufferings it inflicted on others? What did the Roman Empire give to the people it enslaved? Concrete. What did the British Empire give to its colonies? Tribal wars. I don’t want to hear of this British soldier’s humanity. And how he comes to be howling in the middle of my country. And how he thinks Ireland is a tragedy. Ireland’s troubles are not a tragedy. They are the crimes his country has done mine. That he does to me, by standing there. (90)

Brenton’s “refusal to allow a humanist rationale of the ‘troubles’ [...] is underlined by the shooting of Chichester that follows” (Bull, *New British Political Dramatists* 207). Hence, Brenton makes it clear that such humanist and liberalist approaches to the Irish

problem would not completely solve the problem but only make it seem less severe. In fact, “progress can only be made towards a peaceful solution in Northern Ireland if all sides acknowledge the influence of their own brand of mythology on contemporary politics” (Peacock, *Thatcher’s Theatre* 70). By revealing the myth-making processes behind such problems, Brenton elucidates the moral background of the situation and leads the reader/audience to an elaboration of concrete approaches towards the solution of the situation.

The play ends with another instance of myth-making when the cook, whose profession becomes useless after the destruction that comes with the Saxon invasion, decides to change his profession and become a poet. He then invents a myth, which is named “Arthur” by the other cook:

FIRST COOK. Actually, he was a King who never was.  
 His government was the people of Britain. His peace was as common as rain or sun. His law was as natural as grass growing in a meadow.  
 And there never was a Government, or a peace, or a law like that.  
 ...  
 And when he was dead, the King who never was and the government that never was – were mourned. And remembered. Bitterly.  
 And thought of as a golden age, lost and yet to come.  
 CORDA. Very pretty.  
 MORGANA. What was his name?  
 FIRST COOK. Any old name dear. (*To the SECOND COOK:*) What was his name?  
 SECOND COOD. Right. Er – any old name.  
 Arthur?  
 Arthur? (94-95)

Thus, Brenton concludes his play with another example of myth-making which also alludes to the use of the Arthurian legend by the British. As Peacock asserts, “[a]nother myth has been created before our very eyes. It has no more truth in it than any other and has simply been invented to satisfy the particular needs of the moment” (*Radical Stages* 134). Brenton also stresses such use of myths in his interview with Philip Oakes: “I believe that Arthur was invented some evening in a ditch for a good historical purpose. He was needed. He gave voice to the aspirations of a defeated people; the once and future King” (qtd. in Peacock, *Radical Stages* 134). Once again, the purpose and “manipulation of myth in the cause of power” is demonstrated to the reader/audience (Bull, *New British Political Dramatists* 208-209). Combined with the earlier myth-making and demythologising, this scene acts like a coda (Carney 444) that not only



brings the whole arguments around history and myth-making in the play together, but also enables not to represent the death of Chichester as a tragedy.

Another Brechtian device that Brenton employs in the *The Romans* is the play's episodic structure. In 1975, Brenton claimed that "there are two kinds of plays—those set in rooms and those outside rooms ... outside means using an epic structure" (qtd. in Reinelt, *After Brecht* 19). *The Romans* fully correlates with this statement as all of its scenes take place outside. "In placing the entirety of the action outside, [Brenton] emphasizes land itself as the root of conquest" (Pennino 90). In the play, Brenton presents Britain's contested soil (Reinelt, *After Brecht* 19) in different time periods through disjointed scenes and continuously juxtaposes these scenes within the play's episodic structure. In this way, Brenton accomplishes to drive his narrative without the feeling of curiosity of what would happen next. Instead, the reader/audience is drawn into a debate around the play's universal themes such as colonisation, imperialism, racism and so on; and at the same time, the play constantly brings the contemporary Irish situation into the debate. Hence, with an episodic structure, Brenton amplifies the A-effects resulting from historicising the events and keeps the critical judgment of the reader/audience alive throughout the play.

In terms of characterisation, Brenton claims that there "is no lead character. There are no 'goodies' and 'baddies'" (Preface. *Plays: 2* viii) in *The Romans*. This complies with Brecht's idea of complex seeing which Raymond Williams describes as follows:

It is not the good person against the bad, but goodness against badness as alternative expressions of a single being. This is complex seeing, and it is deeply integrated with the dramatic form: the character who lives this way and then that, enacting choice and requiring decision. No resolution is imposed. The tension is there to the end, and we are formally invited to consider it. (234-35)

That "complex seeing is witnessing, which requires the audience to engage in a constant act of evaluation and reevaluation, a process encouraged by Brenton" (Pennino 94). The slave, Corda and Morgana whom Carney labels as "the sly survivors" (436, 440) are examples of such characters. They act according to the situation they are involved in, trying to survive in a violent world with stones in their hands. Besides this, Rylance also mentions that many of Brenton's plays feature a character who is central to the action and each "play is structured to invite the audience's identification with this liberal voice,

only to defeat and cancel it, exposing the creed as a terrible impotent deceit” (128). This technique also creates an A-effect in the reader/audience and Brenton employs it on Chichester, who is prone to gain the sympathy of the reader/audience with his liberal humanist voice, however, that urge is eventually diminished by the end of the play.

As *The Romans* is an epic play with too many characters, actors need to play multiple parts in the play. However, Brenton also makes use of this necessity to further enhance his arguments and the parallels between different periods in the play. The Roman soldiers who took part in Marban’s rape scene are the same with those that apprehend Chichester. As Boon notes, Brenton also recreates the image of Marban’s rape in this scene as: “Chichester is forced face down to the ground, sat upon and searched, his head pulled back by the hair” (*Brenton: The Playwright* 200). By using the same actors as oppressors, Brenton creates parallels between the oppressions in different periods which aids the overall effect intended with historicisation. Moreover, the role-playing in the play also creates an A-effect between both the characters and the reader/audience by emphasising theatricality, and the actors and their roles by distancing them from their roles.

Besides these, *The Romans* also includes instances of direct audience address and play-within-play sequences as Brechtian devices. In the play, asides are used to interrupt the flow of the play, to relay some background information about the characters and events that happened off-stage, and to provide commentary. On the other hand, the dream sequences in Part Two can be considered as instances of play-within-play device as Chichester remains on stage while the events happening in 515 AD are depicted. The use of these devices in the play creates A-effects by disrupting the dramatic illusion and along with other Brechtian devices, aids the conveyance of the play’s messages.

The set of *The Romans* is quite naturalistic and this is not Brechtian; this is the single element of the play’s production that did not satisfy Brenton (Boon, *Brenton: The Playwright* 185). The use of costumes and props, however, again aid Brenton in providing the links between the different narratives of the play. As Pennino notes, at the end of the first part, with “a single image on the stage, Brenton crafts a clear visual parallel between the British in Ireland and the Romans in Britain [...] Because the actor portraying Caesar appears both in Roman garb and contemporary uniform, the

relationship between the two periods is a visceral one for the audience” (92). Brenton also mostly diverts from Brechtian standards in terms of lighting, which is used in a naturalistic way to depict the passage of time through the play’s two-day timeline. The play opens in darkness, however, with Conlag’s lines “Where the fuck are we?” depriving the reader/audience of any clue regarding when and where the play takes place at the beginning. The “deliberate use of modern idiom to render the speech of these ancient characters confuses the audience’s ability to use language as a clue to the time in which the play is set” (Henderson 33). Hence, the use of lighting at the beginning of the play confuses the reader/audience, and thus, acts as an A-effect.

In *The Romans*, Brenton mainly uses historicisation along with several other Brechtian devices to lead his reader/audience to dwell upon the contemporary Irish situation as well as universal issues such as imperialism and racism. By juxtaposing three different narrative lines which take place in 54 BC, 515 AD and 1980, Brenton highlights the similarities of imperialism, racism and colonisation between epochs. He also handles the issues of history and myth by putting them in constant scrutiny. *The Romans* “explores the shape of historical change and, more importantly, the processes by which history is perceived and preserved” (Ponnuswami, “Celts and Celticists” 70) and uses Brechtian dialectic in doing so. By juxtaposing different periods within the play’s episodic structure and historicising events, Brenton, like Brecht, uses remote settings to treat a contemporary problem. With the aid of several other epic devices such as Brechtian characterisation, role-playing, direct audience address, play-within-play, Brenton produces A-effects, breaks the dramatic illusion and leads the reader/audience to approach the play critically. Through all of these Brechtian devices, Brenton brings the argument of the play to the reader/audience.

*The Romans* is the first of Brenton’s play’s produced on such an epic scale on the main stage of one of the country’s most prominent venues. The play became part of one of the most significant controversies in the history of British theatre and despite all the negativity towards it, *The Romans* was performed on a full run of two seasons with a great box-office success during its original production. *The Romans* not only deals with the contemporary situation in Ireland, but also provides universal debates about issues such as imperialism and colonialism which can be seen from both Brenton’s and West’s

remarks on the revival of the play. With *The Romans*, Brenton brings into mainstream theatre an issue which was met with a considerable resistance (Griffiths 40) in such venues before. While stressing that Ireland's troubles are not tragedy but crime in the play, Brenton makes use of Brechtian devices. As Boon claims, *The Romans* is "the summation of the British epic theatre Brenton had been developing throughout the nineteen seventies" (*Brenton: The Playwright* 181).

## CONCLUSION

Like many other British political playwrights of the mid and late twentieth century, Howard Brenton was influenced by Bertolt Brecht and his epic theatre and used some Brechtian devices in his plays to convey his political messages to the reader/audience. In contrast to Aristotelian theatre, which aimed for a realistic representation and an emotional catharsis, epic theatre aimed to lead the reader/audience to approach the play critically by emphasising its theatricality through certain devices. These Brechtian devices sought to create A-effects which estranged the action that took place in the play and led the reader/audience to look at the issues from different perspectives and pass their judgment accordingly. Brenton adopted these Brechtian techniques and incorporated them into his own style. As it was illustrated in this thesis, in his plays produced between 1972 and 1980, he uses certain Brechtian devices more dominantly than others. In the plays analysed in this thesis, Brenton prioritised the use of role-playing in *Hitler Dances*, Brechtian characterisation and episodic structure in *Magnificence* and historicisation in *The Romans* to other Brechtian devices.

In *Hitler Dances*, a limited number of actors and musicians perform many different roles. The actors also step out of their roles and act as narrators and address the reader/audience directly in the play. The intensive use of these devices emphasises the theatricality of the play and prevents the identification of both the reader/audience with the characters and the actors with their roles. These, along with other Brechtian devices Brenton employs in the play act as A-effects that aid Brenton in delivering his views about the myths around war and heroism. In *Magnificence*, Brenton employs a Brechtian approach to characterisation and episodic structure more dominantly to convey the argument of the play. The contradictions within the characters throughout the play and also the contradictions in their relations with other characters enable the reader/audience to critically approach the issues of correct political action, housing, inequality, capitalism and state violence, which are the main points Brenton's messages revolve around in the play. Brenton's characterisation shows that social issues are subject to change just like the characters in the play, as the idea that people can alter the society and be altered by it is vital in the epic theatre. Moreover, the episodic structure of the play ties the scenes with noticeable knots and increases the overall effectiveness

of the play's final message besides acting as an A-effect for the reader/audience by interrupting the narratives with discontinuous episodes. As for *The Romans*, the dominant device in the play is historicisation, which enables Brenton to shed light on the contemporary Irish issue in 1980 by drawing parallels between the past colonial history of Britain in 54 BC and 515 AD. Through historicisation, Brenton exposes the similarities of the Roman and Saxon invasions of Britain with the contemporary British presence in Ireland. He also questions several myths regarding the British identity and reveals them as underlying aspects of the contemporary problem. With such an approach, Brenton draws his reader/audience into a debate around a problem which they are also part of.

Besides these devices that are in the foreground in these plays, Brenton also employs some other Brechtian devices less intensively. Although it is more central to the argument of *Magnificence*, episodic structure is employed in the other two plays analysed in this thesis as well. The scenes in both *Hitler Dances* and *The Romans* do not follow a cause and effect relationship and in *The Romans*, they are often juxtaposed with each other. Furthermore, all of the plays feature play-within-play sequences of some sort, which disrupt the dramatic illusion; however, this device is used more profoundly in *Hitler Dances*. In terms of characterisation, the contradictions in the characters are not as profound in either *Hitler Dances* or *The Romans* as in *Magnificence*. Moreover, all three of the plays employ narrators and direct audience address to an extent, however, these are used more fully in *Hitler Dances*. *Magnificence* does not make use of role-playing, while *The Romans* features it to emphasise the parallels that are created through historicisation, and also to create A-effects for both the reader/audience and the actors by preventing them from identifying with the action or their roles. Besides *The Romans*, historicisation is also used in *Hitler Dances* mainly to demythologise the notion of heroism and certain myths around the Second World War and to reveal the effects of such myths on current generations. In terms of stage design, *Hitler Dances* is closest to Brechtian norms with its bare stage, *Magnificence* is slightly Brechtian with several scenes with minimal setting while *The Romans* is not Brechtian with its naturalistic setting. Brenton's use of music as a Brechtian device also follows a similar pattern as it is employed more intensively in *Hitler Dances* with musicians and songs that provide commentary and interrupt the action, whereas in *Magnificence*, it is

solely used as a device that dictates the action, and in *The Romans*, it is not used at all. As for lighting, in all three of the plays analysed in this thesis, Brenton mostly follows a similar method and uses it expressively, which makes it one of the aspects of these plays in which Brenton deviates from the Brechtian norms, which urges for a brightly illuminated stage. Lastly, among these three plays, Brenton makes use of masks as Brechtian devices only in *Hitler Dances* where he utilises them to emphasise theatricality.

These three plays also have an important place in Brenton's career as a playwright. *Hitler Dances*, which was first performed at the fringe venue Traverse Theatre Club by the Theatre Workshop Company in 1972, is situated as an intermediary work for Brenton, which carries many qualities of his previous plays from the fringe and also signals a move towards the mainstream. With this play, Brenton received a commission from the Royal Court Theatre for his next play, *Magnificence*, which was performed in the main bill of the state subsidised venue in 1973. With *Magnificence*, Brenton brought to the mainstream not only the political concerns he had discussed in the fringe, but also the form he had developed which he labelled as "British epic theatre" (Preface. *Plays: 1 xi*). *Magnificence* ensured Brenton's shift towards the mainstream, since after the play, he received another commission from the National Theatre for the venue's newly built Lyttelton stage and eventually for the main Olivier stage with *The Romans*. After *The Romans*, Brenton continued to stage his plays in many of the mainstream venues of Britain as well as in some smaller venues.

*The Romans* marks a peak point among Brenton's plays with epic qualities with its scale and complexity. Also, Brenton claims that the play "had taken the epic form as far as it would go" (qtd. in Boon, *Brenton: The Playwright* 212). It can be observed that after *The Romans*, Brenton continued to use Brechtian devices in some of his major plays. In *The Genius* (1983), which is Brenton's adaptation of Brecht's *The Life of Galileo* and which was performed at the Royal Court Theatre, Brenton makes use of historicisation and an epic play structure. Another major work of Brenton from the same decade is *Bloody Poetry*, which was first staged at the Hampstead Theatre in 1984 and then revived at the Royal Court Theatre in 1988. Although the play is not considered as an obvious epic play, it utilises Brechtian juxtaposition. In the revision of his article "The

Best We Have, Alas: Bertolt Brecht” in 1990s, Brenton claims that “Brecht remains the best dramatist we have from this century, but, alas, he is fast becoming of little use to us” (*Hot Irons* 69). Similarly, in 1992, Brenton states that the “‘British epic’ theatre with its ‘issue plays’ that my generation of playwrights invented and wrote through the seventies and eighties ... has died on us. This is normal artistic life; what was once white-hot invention becomes dead convention, mere theatricality. We need new ways of dramatising what people are thinking and feeling out there” (qtd. in Shank 15). The decline in the use of Brechtian devices in his plays is apparent in this decade. For instance, in *Berlin Bertie* (1992), which was produced at the Royal Court, Brenton uses direct audience address as a Brechtian device in a play that is otherwise mostly realistic. In the beginning of the next century, David Edgar points out the decline of Brechtian history plays in an interview in 2004 (Botham 170). However, Brenton continued to use historicisation as a Brechtian device to shed light on contemporary issues by referring to the past. Brenton employs historicisation in *Paul* (2005) which was staged at the National Theatre; and *In Extremis: The Story of Abelard and Heloise* (2006) and *Anne Boleyn* (2010) both of which were first produced at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre.

Despite his anti-Brechtian claims in the earlier stages of his career, as a political playwright committed to change, Howard Brenton highly makes use of Brechtian devices in his plays in order to create an A-effect for the reader/audience, thus enabling them to approach the issues developed in his plays critically. It is seen in the plays that are analysed in this thesis – namely *Hitler Dances*, *Magnificence* and *The Romans* – that Brenton does not fully adopt methods of Brecht’s epic theatre but prioritises certain Brechtian devices and employs them according to his needs. He also uses several other Brechtian devices such as direct audience address, narrator, play within-a-play, music, songs, set, lighting, props, and masks besides the predominant ones in all of these plays to complement the form of the plays in order to deliver his intended political messages. These plays also mark significant milestones in Brenton’s career as a playwright as they mark his transition from the fringe into the mainstream. Even though Brenton’s use of Brechtian devices declines especially after the 1990s, and he indicates the need to employ new forms of dramatisation, it is seen that Brenton continues to use some Brechtian devices throughout his career even though not as often and intensely as in the 1970s and 1980s.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Brecht uses a street accident analogy as a basic model to describe his idea of acting in epic theatre in his article, "The Street Scene." He mentions an eyewitness demonstrating the behaviours of the driver and victim of a traffic accident to a group of people in such a way that it allows them to form an opinion of an accident they did not even witness. Brecht claims that the demonstration here should not be perfect. It "would be spoilt if the bystanders' attention were drawn to his powers of transformation." The demonstrator has to avoid exclamations like "What a lifelike portrayal of a driver! He must not 'cast a spell' over anyone. He should not transport people from normality to 'higher realms.' He need not dispose of any special powers of suggestion" (*Brecht on Theatre* 176-77). The eyewitness then "describes the sequence of events leading up to [the accident], illustrating the behaviour of those involved by 'quoting' their movements, their gestures, their manner, in as far as these seem relevant to the goal of establishing where the responsibility lay for the accident" (Spiers 44). This model demonstrates the kind of relation actors should have with their roles and the audience in epic theatre. Brecht asserts that, to "achieve the V-effect the actor must give up his *complete conversion* into a stage character. He *shows* the character, he *quotes* his lines, he *repeats* a real-life incident" (*The Messingkauf Dialogues* 104). Hence, in the street scene just as in theatre, the demonstrator's aim is "not to *impersonate* the characters in this everyday drama but to *describe* their interaction (or '*Gestus*' as Brecht called it) with sufficient objectivity and in as much detail as is necessary to enable the 'jury' to analyse the sequence of cause and effect and to estimate the degree of responsibility to be borne by each part involved" (Spiers 44).

<sup>2</sup> One of the gestic actress Helene Weigel employed in *Mother Courage and Her Children* is a good example for gestic acting. David Richard Jones interprets that example through Brecht's modelbook for *Mother Courage Couragemodell 1949*:

Weigel set to work on the same problem by inventing a small detail, the kind of odd gesture or habit that often centers a character: she quite audibly snapped her purse when concluding a financial transaction. Snapping the purse was a crisp action that closed a sale and signaled her degree of satisfaction. It would be characteristic of Courage to snap her purse—and to carry it always, in all weathers and all situations, on her right thigh. [...] The sound of the purse constantly reminded the audience that work was central to her life. (117)

This small gestic act provides a much bigger contribution to the A-effect and overall to the feel of the play in part with some other devices in the last scene which could otherwise prove to be a dramatic part after Mother Courage loses her last child to war and has to pay for her burial:

She reached into her purse for what little money she had left. The peasants gathered around, watching her purse and her hands. She surveyed her money, kept one coin back, and gave them the rest. This was a reminder that Courage always saved, always calculated against the future, even though her subconscious mind sometimes had to attend to the arrangements. [...] As the body disappeared, she popped the coin back into her purse and snapped the purse shut. With this sound, all the previous purse snappings returned to memory with cumulative force. The moral is that conducting business during a war leads to destitution. (Jones 123)

By the end of the play, we are made sure that Mother Courage has not learned anything and continues to be the thrifty businesswoman of the capitalist ideology. Even through

that single gesture, Weigel and Brecht achieved many desired effects for the play as Brecht reveals in the *Couragemodell 1949*:

This little gesture has the power and suddenness of a discovery—a discovery concerning human nature, which is molded by conditions. To dig out the truth from the rubble of the self-evident, to link the particular strikingly with the universal, to capture the particular that characterizes a general process, that is the art of the realist. (qtd. in Jones 124)

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## APPENDIX 1. ORIGINALITY REPORT



**HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
MASTER'S THESIS ORIGINALITY REPORT**

**HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY  
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ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE DEPARTMENT**

Date: 26/09/2019

Thesis Title : The Use of Brechtian Devices in Howard Brenton's *Hitler Dances, Magnificence* and *The Romans in Britain*

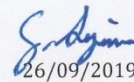
According to the originality report obtained by myself by using the Turnitin plagiarism detection software and by applying the filtering options checked below on 26/09/2019 for the total of 109 pages including the a) Title Page, b) Introduction, c) Main Chapters, and d) Conclusion sections of my thesis entitled as above, the similarity index of my thesis is 3 %.

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**Student No:** N14220216  
**Department:** English Language and Literature  
**Program:** English Language and Literature – Master of Arts

### **ADVISOR APPROVAL**


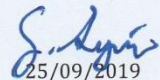

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Prof. Dr. Ayşe Deniz Bozer

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## APPENDIX 2. ETHICS BOARD WAIVER FORM

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Date: 25/09/2019		
Thesis Title: The Use of Brechtian Devices in Howard Brenton's <i>Hitler Dances</i> , <i>Magnificence</i> and <i>The Romans in Britain</i>		
My thesis work related to the title above: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Does not perform experimentation on animals or people.</li> <li>2. Does not necessitate the use of biological material (blood, urine, biological fluids and samples, etc.).</li> <li>3. Does not involve any interference of the body's integrity.</li> <li>4. Is not based on observational and descriptive research (survey, interview, measures/scales, data scanning, system-model development).</li> </ol>		
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<b>Student No:</b> N14220216		
<b>Department:</b> English Language and Literature		
<b>Program:</b> English Language and Literature		
<b>Status:</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MA <input type="checkbox"/> Ph.D. <input type="checkbox"/> Combined MA/ Ph.D.		
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