

## Delivering the Message: *Gestus* and Aguirre's *Los papeleros*

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Without a doubt, Bertolt Brecht's writings have influenced both the use and the critical analysis of dramatic structure in Latin America's drama of protest. A number of writers embrace his theory while others admit the existence of Brecht's influence but do not see it as an important factor in their own work. Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal points to Brecht as a necessary element in the development of Latin America's theatre of commitment.<sup>1</sup> Plays by Argentina's Osvaldo Dragún are often characterized as being "Brechtian" or analyzed with reference to Brechtian structures. Yet, the playwright himself does not always agree that this is the case. Dragún feels that although Brecht has had an effect on Latin American theatre, the structures in Dragún's own plays have always been a part of Argentina's dramatic tradition.<sup>2</sup>

Pedro Bravo-Elizondo underscores Dragún's assertion, but approaches the question from a different direction. Bravo-Elizondo says that Brecht is important to Latin America's playwrights but is used in a manner appropriate to regional problems. In the analysis framed by this statement, Bravo-Elizondo finds structures characteristic of Brechtian drama in, for example, *La muerte no entrará en palacio* by René Marqués and *La pasión según Antígona Pérez* by Luis Rafael Sánchez.<sup>3</sup> Another example of a critical approach which employs Brecht in the analysis of a particular work is Carlos Solórzano's discussion of Agustín Cuzzani's *El centroforward murió al amanecer*. Solórzano uses Brecht to characterize the structure and theme of the play's first act.<sup>4</sup>

Further examination of critical literature of specific works could provide the interested reader with a long list of playwrights whose work is considered Brechtian or contains identifiable Brechtian structures. However, the purpose of this discussion is to go beyond the identification and analysis of structures in selected plays.

If we can recognize Brecht as a decided presence in Latin American theatre, we must also recognize that those who use Brechtian structures have a definite goal in mind: to carry a message to the audience. For that reason, anyone—reader, critic or director—who intends to approach a play containing



Brechtian structures must first examine the structures, then step into the actors' shoes and go further. Examining this type of play as a potential production, or actually staging a work so that it can evoke the desired response in an audience, requires extra effort and attention to detail. The message in Brechtian drama is delivered to the spectator through a variety of alienation-effect techniques such as visible lighting, music that underscores the message, scene fragmentation, "showing" rather than "being" a character, and reminding each spectator that he or she is watching a theatrical production. Emotion and illusion should not destroy intellectual reaction.<sup>5</sup>

However, all Brechtian techniques must be considered as only one part of a theoretical work in the process of evolution. It would be a mistake to treat Brechtian dramatic structures as fixed in form and in complete opposition to traditional theatre or the theatre of illusion. According to Patrice Pavis, Brecht was continually revising his thoughts on dramatic structure:

. . . the center of gravity is constantly shifting: Brecht formulates his critique of the "Aristotelian" dramatic form in reaction to the notion of identification and catharsis; then he shows his interest in the possibility of imitation and of critical realism; finally, "theatre dialectics" gives him the chance to propose a method of analysis of reality, and to go beyond the overly stressed oppositions between epic/dramatic, formalism/realism, showing/incarnating, etc.<sup>6</sup>

Unless the critics or readers constantly review their approach to Brecht, they will not discover the most appropriate way to use Brechtian structures in a production.

For example, one Brechtian structure that needs careful analysis before being used on stage is the character as representative or sign for a social or political type. Without analysis, characters that fall into clearly-defined social or political slots could be transformed into cartoon-like figures or stereotypes unable to transmit the play's true essence. These figures will not have the proper impact on an audience. Like violent or humorous characters, social and political types are unsuccessful if they are too far removed from the spectator's experience—if some compelling relationship between the two personalities cannot be perceived.

Characters in a Brechtian drama and the techniques that bring them to life on stage could easily be weakened by a flat reading or careless production.<sup>7</sup> The reader, critic or director must be able to enhance the play's effect on the public. Any experienced reader could suggest a number of valid approaches to the problem. My own suggestion for the purpose of this discussion is to "read" selected scenes from a Latin American drama that consciously contains Brechtian structures by applying Patrice Pavis's approach to Brecht's writings on *Gestus*.

Pavis's examination of *Gestus* and its relationship to Story have led him to conclude that this concept is one of the more complex in Brechtian theory. *Gestus* can refer to any type of gesture beyond everyday, conventional gesture, illustrative gestures like those found in declamation or the expressive gesture of dance:

The question of its extent is as complex as that of its specificity. *Gestus* may be a simple bodily movement of the actor (facial ex-



pression), or a particular way of behaving (gestuality), or a physical relationship between two characters, or a stage arrangement (a figure formed by a group of characters), or the common behavior of a group, the collective attitude of characters in a play, or the gesture of global delivery from the stage to the public via the *mise en scène* . . . What would appear, in its slightest manifestation, as the index of an attitude, becomes an intentional signal emitted by the actor. The actor constantly controls his gestuality, in order to indicate the character's social attitude and way of behaving (p. 41).

The actor, or in our case the reader projecting action, may not merely reproduce stereotypes. He must research pertinent social relationships in detail and reflect the result of his work through a subtle use of *Gestus*. Pavis has divided his study into several categories which elaborate Brecht's central idea of *Gestus*: the existence of "social *Gestus*, characteristic of an actor or a particular stage business—and the *basic gestus* ("Grundgestus"), which is characteristic of the play or of a particular action (p. 42)." Here, I will extract the elements from each category that might allow a reader to construct an effective physical or mental projection of the play to be examined.

Isadora Aguirre, whose play, *Los papeleros*, is the focus of this study or "reading" has recognized Brecht's theories as a valuable contribution to her own development as a politically committed writer:

Brecht para mí fue importantísimo. Yo antes escribía teatro porque me atraía la escena, ese juego de recrear vidas etcétera, pero en el momento en que yo me encuentro con Brecht cambié radicalmente, es decir, descubrí que en el teatro podía expresar una ideología de manera dinámica. Y de ahí entonces partieron las obras como *Los papeleros*, . . . en que ya no se plantea el teatro como sencillamente recoger datos de la cultura o del folklore y ponerlas en escena, sino que ya tienen sentido. Por eso a Brecht lo he estudiado muchísimo.<sup>8</sup>

The two Brechtian structures most in evidence in *Los papeleros* are the use of regional music to comment on action and direct contact between the audience and the characters. Aguirre, who wrote musical comedy before *Los papeleros*, felt that these alienation-effect devices would have the greatest impact on her public.<sup>9</sup> The audience, exposed to emotional distancing by the techniques, and achieving intellectual recognition through them, could be brought closer to the characters and the play's message.

*Los papeleros* concerns the oppression and suffering that Chile's garbage collectors must face in their daily struggle for survival. Aguirre wrote the play only after she had spent time observing the people whose lives she dramatized.<sup>10</sup> Because the play contains a documentary background, it should be possible to transmit to the audience a personal experience of the characters' reality.

The plot of *Los papeleros* follows the activities of Romilia, who attempts to improve life in the garbage dump after she realizes that her son has left her family home in the country to find her in the city. She feels it is necessary to seek reform, although her efforts to free herself from the dump owners have not succeeded so far. This time instead of leaving the dump, Romilia decides to make her co-workers defy the owners and demand better conditions,



including proper housing. When she cannot convince them to pursue this objective aggressively, she sets fire to their huts.

Although every scene is significant and must be studied carefully, I intend to examine four which might prove treacherous because stereotypes could easily be drawn. These are the scenes depicting confrontations between social classes, Romilia's son's meeting with a young girl and the scene in which Romilia realizes she has lost.

The play begins with the narrator, Julio, introducing its theme and opening the action. Julio is picking up trash when he encounters a servant singing outside a respectable house. When she accuses him of being lazy and dirty, he explains that this is the only work he can find and asks for leftovers. She then delivers a speech reflecting society's opinion of the poor in general:

DOMÉSTICA—Bah . . . ya se cebó, ya. Dése a santo que le permita escarbar. Mi patrona es muy estricta con la caridad. Tiene sus obras sociales en poblaciones con el señor cura, pero me tiene prohibido darle a los pordioseros que vienen a pedir con tarrito. Chs . . . después se acostumbran y no se mueven más de la puerta. Ya, ya . . . ¡córrase! Mire el desparramo que me está dejando, son peor que los perros . . . (Él se acerca y ella retrocede asustada.) ¡No me eche sus pulgas! Ya, mándese cambiar o llamo a los pacos . . .<sup>11</sup>

Julio insults her and turns on El Tigre, Romilia's son who has been watching the encounter, saying threateningly, ". . . ¿Qué miráis hocicón?" (p. 248). He does not change his attitude toward El Tigre until he discovers the boy's relationship to Romilia.

The first scene establishes the *basic gestus* of the play, that is, this confrontation among the characters is a condensed version of the play's story: the ruling class does not understand the poor and fears any contact. The ruling class's reaction to the poor makes dialogue between the two groups impossible and turns the lower class into beings who often fear and mistreat their own kind out of a sense of helplessness. Actors in the scene must consider not only the introduction of the play's theme, but their relationship with the characters. A painstaking examination of each part is important for both the actor dramatizing Julio, who has a more extensive role, and the actress playing Doméstica whose contact with the audience is brief.

Because Doméstica has to represent the middle-class audience, her actions must reflect the audience's behavior in some way. She must not be dismissed for being overly cruel or for belonging to the servant class. When discussing the connection between an actor creating a character and *Gestus*, Pavis points out that Brecht's *Gestus* "assures mediation between bodily action and character behavior; it is situated midway between the character and the determination of his possible actions. As an object of the actor's research, it becomes more and more specific in defining what the character does, and consequently, what he is . . ." (p. 43). The proper use of *Gestus* lets the actor construct the Story or the "sum total of *Gestus* and the relationships between the characters" (p. 43).

The actors who create Julio and Doméstica have to define the characters' behavior according to a well-considered selection of socially encoded ges-



tures—gestures that belong to a group or a class. Both characters face the task of conveying to the spectator two levels of meaning without becoming a stereotype and thus an uninteresting and ineffective transmitter of a political message. Pavis affirms, "The spectator (and the actor) is constantly invited to select a few details from the gesture in order to have them reveal a social conduct which is not delivered in its definitive form but remains the object of critical appraisal" (p. 44).

Julio is the link between the audience and the play's message, as well as a garbage collector in the story line. He is responsible for leading the audience toward the theme and toward the action. Although Doméstica is a servant, she repeats and exposes her employer's view of the city's poor. She is essentially a double sign: the servant class through her actions (sweeping) and the ruling class through her speech. The social gestures chosen here could either lose or capture the audience's attention.

A confrontation between oppressor and oppressed is also portrayed in the scene in which the workers, encouraged by Romilia, go to the owner and complain about working and living conditions in the dump. This scene could be very difficult for actors dedicated to delivering the proper message because its structure emphasizes a stereotypic situation between rich and poor. The owner appears only as a voice on a loudspeaker. His representative, appropriately named El Perro, does not speak for him as Doméstica does for her employers, but does carry out his orders.

*Gestus*, as discussed by Pavis, divides performance into the "shown" (the said) and the "showing" (the saying) (p.45). This division stops movement and allows comment on any possible action on stage. By removing the owner from a face-to-face meeting with the workers, the playwright places the responsibility for transmitting the message on the words spoken. The actor who plays the owner must use social *Gestus* in "showing" the character's attitudes only through intonation, personal accent and timing. When referring to the semiosis of *Gestus*, Pavis says that Brecht's discussion of Gestic music expands the ideas of *Gestus* to music and text. Brecht states that "A language is gestic when it is grounded in a *Gestus* and conveys particular attitudes adopted by the speaker" (p. 47). The actor is required to use "gestuality and mimic expression, which are quite precise and easy to visualize . . ." (p. 47).

Of course, the workers and El Perro are visible to the audience and have an opportunity to illustrate their relationship with each other and the owner through both the "shown" and the "showing"—their speech and gestures. The danger lies in inattention to the idea of *Gestus* as the scene is constructed, and thus not establishing the most effective interpretation of the interaction between the owner as oppressor and the workers as his victims. When the scene is played or read, the spectator must recognize his or her own feelings and reactions to the poor.

El Tigre's meeting with La Mocha, who saves him from a life of crime, and Romilia's burning of her co-workers' huts also need to be visualized or performed with the concept of *Gestus* clearly in mind. Otherwise these scenes could become overdrawn or melodramatic, and in the process lose any potential alienation effect. Pavis believes that *Gestus* is "the principle of



tures—gestures that belong to a group or a class. Both characters face the task of conveying to the spectator two levels of meaning without becoming a stereotype and thus an uninteresting and ineffective transmitter of a political message. Pavis affirms, "The spectator (and the actor) is continually invited to select a few details from the gesture in order to have them reveal a social conduct which is not delivered in its definitive form but remains the object of critical appraisal" (p. 44).

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8. Isadora Aguirre, Eugenio Guzmán y Rine Leal, "Recoger la hazaña de los muertos y entregarla a los vivos," *Conjunto*, No. 8 (1968), 59.

9. See Aguirre, Guzmán and Leal, p. 59.

10. See "De la comedia musical al teatro de protesta: Isadora Aguirre," *Conjunto*, No. 10 (1968), 46.

11. Isadora Aguirre, *Los papeleros* in *El teatro actual latinoamericano*, ed. Carlos Solórzano (México: Ediciones de Andrea, 1972), p. 248. Subsequent references to this work in the text are from this edition.

The danger lies in insurrection in the idea of Given as the scene is constructed, and thus not establishing the most effective interpretation of the interaction between the owner as oppressor and the workers as his victims. When the scene is played or read, the spectator must recognize his or her own feelings and reactions to the poor.

El Fero's meeting with La Mocha, who saves him from a life of crime, and Romilia's burning of her co-workers' hats also need to be visualized or internalized in the mind of the audience. Otherwise these scenes could become overdrawn or melodramatic, and in the process lose any potential alienation effect. Pavis believes that Given is "the principle of

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