

Expressionism In The Theatre

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My early days of teaching high school drama were somewhat saturated with a fascination of German theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht (many of my current students would probably suggest that same fascination is still alive and well!). As I dug deeper into the mind of Brecht trying to discover what it was that made this genius tick, I found he was heavily influenced by expressionism in the theatre happening in Germany when he was a young man. So began my interest in expressionism, itself.

Expressionism sometimes means many things to different people, so I thought I'd blog verbatim a key section from a seminal text on this style: J L Styan's [Modern Drama in Theory and Practice 3: Expressionism and Epic Theatre](#), first published back in 1981. The following excerpts are what initially helped me understand this most complex of theatrical forms, one that was much stronger in the visual than performing arts (Edvard Munch's *The Scream* etc).

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

1. Its **atmosphere** was often vividly dreamlike and nightmarish. The mood was aided by shadowy, unrealistic lighting and visual distortions in the set. A characteristic use of pause and silence, carefully placed in counterpoint with speech and held for an abnormal length of time, also contributed to the dream effect.
2. **Settings** avoided reproducing the detail of naturalistic drama, and created only those starkly simplified images the theme of the play called for. The decor was often made up of bizarre shapes and sensational colours.
3. The **plot and structure** of the play tended to be disjointed and broken into episodes, incidents and tableaux, each making a point of its own. Instead of the dramatic conflict of the well made play, the emphasis was on a sequence of dramatic statements made by the dreamer, usually the author himself. From this structure, grew Brecht's epic theatre...
4. **Characters** lost their individuality and were merely identified by nameless designations, like *The Man, The Father, The Son* ... such characteristics were stereotypes and caricatures rather than individual personalities, and represented social groups rather than particular people ... they could appear grotesque and unreal...
5. The **dialogue**, unlike conversation, was poetical, febrile, rhapsodic. At one time it might take the form of a long lyrical monologue, and at another, of staccato telegraphese – made up of phrases of one or two words or expletives.
6. The **style of acting** was a deliberate departure from the realism of Stanislavsky. Moreover, in avoiding the detail of human behaviour, a player might appear to be overacting, and adopting the broad, mechanical movements of a puppet.