

Distance & Connection: Using the Alienation Effect and “The Drama of Commitment” as a Lens for Compassion-Oriented Theatre

By Jacob Buttry

Many pieces of performance successfully channel a core element of theatre that many artists celebrate worldwide—the ability of a piece of performance to make us feel something, to make us have a sense of care and concern for our fellow person whose situation we had not previously understood on such an intimate level.

Emotional impact can be very potent in creating other change; it can shift opinions on public policy, lead to financial contribution, and more. However, if we stop at emotional affectation, we often feel like a massive change has been made, when that has only been made in ourselves and not in the lives of those most impacted by the emotional situations presented in the piece of theatre. How do we take this strength of intentional emotional change in ourselves and increase the likelihood that it will be extended into actionable, tangible changes to society? Specifically, how might theatrical performance facilitate this extra step?

One of the most notable commentaries on this concept in performance—and one that has instigated a slew of subsequent investigations, opinions, and subsets of performance—comes from Bertolt Brecht, notorious mid-twentieth century playwright and theatre practitioner whose “alienation effect” advocated for the elimination of empathetic experience in the theatre so that it would not distract audiences from the real work at hand in creating activist change. I have discussed in previous work how Brechtian ideas correlate well with the psychological understandings of empathy, which is broken down into components that include affective empathy (the ability to feel what others feel) and cognitive empathy (the ability to take another person’s perspective and understand their situation outside of emotion). Brecht’s

alienation effect essentially argues for the minimization of affective empathy so that more critical engagement can occur (Over 174-175). Many have corroborated this perspective, especially those frustrated with how the romanticization of empathy ignores how frequently it can be co-opted by oppressive systems to actually avoid meaningful change.

Some have also used Brecht's ideas in disciplines outside of theatre, such as Andrew Samuels, who argued for the use of a Brechtian perspective within psychotherapy whereby a therapist facilitates the client acting in the role of "an 'active spectator,' participating in an argument" (688). In this paradigm, the therapist also takes on a position of "ex-volvement" whereby they take on a more external position that de-emphasizes emotion in their attempt to interact effectively with the client and their situation.

However, it seems that Brecht's overall approach, while correctly identifying how emotional impact can easily stall in a state of complacency, seems to leave unused a major asset of theatre's power for social change. Emotion and connection often serve as the fire of passion behind movements for social justice and action. Furthermore, psychologically, the chain that ends in compassion often begins with affective empathy, which then moves to cognitive empathy, empathic concern, and then into actionable compassion. By eliminating that initial step, some of that momentum might disappear. Even beyond this, if we don't have the emotional component, we do not fully engage with the element of human connection that is often most central to our work as artists and is, perhaps at times, one of the most enrapturing elements of live theatre. Why should we scrap emotion, kindness, and empathy for their misuse rather than advocating for a redirection of that energy and strength? Professor William Over of St. John's University in Jamaica argues that "empathy and critical perspective are not exclusive

of one another in drama” (175). It seems that we do not need to eliminate emotion to lead to activism—instead, perhaps, we can encourage emotion to lead to action instead of to complacency.

Nigerian playwright Dr. Tess Onwueme added to this discussion of Brecht by reintroducing empathy and emotion into her use of Brechtian techniques in playwrighting. Over succinctly describes her unique adaptation of Brecht by describing how “she moves beyond the binary of distance and empathy to create a unique feminist theatre where feeling both for and with the character occurs within the contexts of historical change” (187). Over describes this work as “drama of commitment,” and he mentions that Onwueme’s work often emphasizes traditional aspects of realism in addition to novel and activist elements (176). Like Brecht, she seeks to break down “dominant traditional thought systems” (187), but she diverges from him in that she seeks to accomplish alienation through “a strong sense of irony, historical struggle and the clash for cultural change” (187) instead of through the breaking of connection to character through empathy.

In a vein similar to Onwueme, psychological research offers another look into how we might pair distance with connection in order to use compassion to create more activist theatre. Researchers such as Jamil Zaki and David Rakel have made fascinating discoveries about the most effective way for combatting these issues, however, and have often discovered that the most effective way of doing so is actually by increasing (healthy) connection with others rather than shying away from connection due to burnout. They advocate for the reduction of a term called “empathic distress,” which involves someone fully taking on the (negative) emotions of another person, and they advocate that it ought to be replaced with “empathic concern,” which

is a feeling of care for another person that does not involve the direct acquisition of their emotional state (Rakel and Golant 220-228; Zaki 113-115). Empathic distress becomes an issue when the excessive acquisition of others' emotion prevents people from distinguishing between their own feelings and the emotions of those they are empathizing with; empathic concern, however, can maintain a connection between the two individuals in a way that facilitates compassionate action instead of leading to the detriment to the empathizer. This psychological perspective aligns with Brecht in the way that it discourages personal emotional involvement with others, but it also aligns with Onwueme in the way that it still involves a mixture of empathy within the distance. Perhaps most noticeably, this element of distance actually emphasizes further connection; instead of promoting distance, it advocates for a healthy type of care that can lead to action instead of helplessness.

Based on all of this, in our approach to creating activist, compassionate theatre, I recommend connection not exactly as an alternative to distance, but rather as the ultimate aim of the distance we create. It seems that an effective way to create change is for us, as artists, to work toward establishing healthy distance that enables and facilitates human connection rather than inhibiting it.

Theatre already lends itself to a number of types of connections that we can seek to enhance. Connection with self (including internal emotions and personal behaviors), connection with concepts (based on themes, topics, or references in performance), connection with the characters and with the theatre piece itself (on emotional, cognitive, personal levels), and connection with people in the real world (through relationship) are all important, relevant, and natural results out of our work in the theatre, and they can also all play a role in the

compassionate process. From this point onward, I am seeking to look at how we can use theatre as a lubricant for connection—as a means of encouraging people to make these connections when they leave the theatre space itself. The rest of this paper includes ideas for how theatre artists in general, but specifically directors, can balance distance and connection in a way that may lead to more meaningful change. I do not assert that these are the only or best ways to do so, but I think each deserves further exploration.

The first of these suggestions centers on performance methods. As seen in Onwueme's focus on realism in many of her plays, incorporating realism as an acting style could prove to be beneficial to facilitating emotional connection in audience members. On this note, focusing on connections between characters in the acting—particularly by highlighting moments where complex emotion is communicated—can help to provide examples for connection to audience members. This is especially true of emotions and connections that are demonstrated through silence and nonverbal communication, as these elements are often overlooked as means of facilitating and inhibiting connection with others in our everyday lives.

Similarly, intentionally choosing to humanize all characters through acting and directing methods serves another important purpose; while much of the humanization of characters falls to playwrights, directors and actors also have a large role to play in putting the humanity of a character on the stage. Often, we can be hesitant to humanize the “villains” and oppressors within our stories; typically, this stems from an appropriate desire not to celebrate oppressive or harmful actions through humanization. However, humanization does not have to equal celebration, and while celebrating oppressors would certainly cause more harm than good, I would argue that not humanizing oppressors can, in a different way, also lead to more harm

than good. Aside from the argument that giving humanization to all characters serves an important compassionate function in affirming the human dignity of all people, the bigger issue may lie in the fact that not humanizing villains can keep us from seeing how we ourselves can participate in oppression and harmful behavior. Not humanizing villains creates a great deal of distance between them and audience members, and this distance can lead people to conclude (falsely, as I would argue) that they could never do something as terrible as the actions of the character. In contrast, by humanizing the character, we might encourage people to recognize how valid hurts and negative emotions can lead people, including themselves, to engage in harmful, even oppressive, behavior. Humanizing villains and allowing people to connect with them may lead people to seek to act differently in situations similar to those of the character; it may equip people to connect with themselves in the safe environment of the theatre and be vulnerable about ways they may have participated in oppression or caused harm to others.

Beyond performance methods, using elements of imagination and abstraction in staging and design may also provide a means to pair distance and connection in a constructive way. Using staging and design (particularly scenic design) that encourages imagination among audience members can facilitate the compassion process. Hinting at settings, providing seeds and sparks for imagining a more fully fleshed-out image, and highlighting themes instead of recreating realistic settings can help to allow a sense of generalizability in contexts outside of the play. This can aid activism because it may lead audience members to better translate what they see onstage into their own lives. By not depicting a fully realistic stage picture, it leaves more room for audiences to imagine the scenarios and the themes of the play happening in their own contexts and lives; it requires less “dissociation” from the play to apply the lessons

from theatre outside of the walls of the building. It also leaves more room for the connections and emotions to be the aspects that stand out to audience members, thus allowing audiences to better remember these elements and, hopefully, imagine how to incorporate the lessons from their emotional experience as behavioral changes. Furthermore, imagination is a crucial skill in the empathetic process—perspective-taking and cognitive empathy in particular rely on the ability to imagine the circumstances of another person and to consider the ways one would feel in a similar situation (Riess; Zaki 74-75). By encouraging the development of that skill through design and staging, theatre artists may also be able to be even more intentional about the way they develop empathy and compassion skills among audience members.

Using abstract aesthetics in staging and design can be one way in particular to facilitate this imagination. Fascinatingly, abstraction holds distance and connection in a unique tension as well. It intentionally creates distance between the representations of the setting and the actual setting that is being represented, but it also intentionally makes connections; these often manifest in connections to other thematic aspects of the work, in the connections it encourages people to make, and the greater focus that is placed on emotional connection between characters.

Continuing on with this concept, one area where directors ought to specifically consider abstraction and the use of imagination is when plays touch on very distressing moments. Especially when it comes to traumatic events, audience members will better benefit from implied portrayals of intense or distressing situations, such as self-harm, abuse, and more. Directors could consider attempting to create moments that lead to concern for others instead of a high-stakes emotional experience of one's own. Even aside from the issues related to

trauma-informed artistic practices, leading audiences to feel upset, afraid, or concerned *themselves*, instead of recognizing those emotions in others, can lead to empathic distress (as discussed earlier) and may actually derail the empathetic process instead of stimulating it. Instead, directors might consider how they can foster empathic concern instead of empathic distress, such as by capturing the emotional components of the angst, the pain, and the terror, and then re-packing those emotional components in a way that allows audiences to see it instead of experiencing it. Showcasing the emotional states of characters instead of seeking to impose those negative emotional states on audience members is a better way to facilitate empathetic connection, not to mention how it may better respect audience consent and autonomy.

The last major idea centers on the concept of facilitation—a broad idea with numerous associations and several possibilities for increasing action-oriented compassion as a fruit of performance. One element included under the “facilitation” umbrella concerns purposefulness and intentionality in preparing a piece of theatre. While most directors have already integrated purposefulness into their practice, being even more direct about what their intentions are might make those intentions more likely to manifest, in this case, in the form of compassionate action in the audience. If they are seeking to inspire audiences to feel compassion for characters and transform those feelings into tangible action, this intentionality should be consciously considered throughout the entire production process so as to best facilitate its outcome. Priya Parker’s book *The Art of Gathering* discusses how having a purpose for every gathering allows the event or gathering to be most successful, and the same could be applied to

the context of theatre, which we could also view as a type of gathering. Perhaps one way to increase compassionate outcomes is simply by intentionally striving to make them happen.

Another aspect of facilitation relates to creating a space that permits vulnerability. Inherently, theatre already creates this “safe space” in allowing people to better consider heavy topics without the baggage that often comes from considering these ideas within the context of real life. However, directors might benefit from more intentionally facilitating a “safe space” where vulnerability is possible by using compassion as a guiding principle in the way that messages are communicated in and around the piece. Furthermore, as basic as it sounds, a welcoming and kind environment in the theatre space itself—particularly before the performance—would likely facilitate this vulnerability as well. If audiences feel better equipped to be vulnerable, it is likely that they would be more inclined to make connections with self, with character, and with others.

The final element of facilitation involves exploring the incorporation of a reflection time after a performance. This differs from a talk-back (which typically centers on audience giving feedback about the piece or artists explaining elements of their process) and a talk-at (which would involve someone standing on the stage and telling audience members what they should have got out of the performance). Instead, the reflection piece could involve members of the production team posing questions to audience members that encourage reflection and application of the piece, such as “What viewpoints has this piece challenged for you?” or “What elements of yourself did you see in the characters?” or “Who is one person you know who you might be better able to connect with because of a barrier that was broken down while watching this performance?” Reflections are often considered to be important aspects in the learning

process, especially in a drama and theatre classroom (seen in Kathryn Dawson and Bridget Kiger Lee's book *Drama-Based Pedagogy*, for just one example), so it would make sense to seek to incorporate this element into performances outside of explicitly educational contexts, particularly when we want audiences to engage more deeply, more meaningfully, and more practically with what they may have gained from the performance. This additional processing of engagement and learning may then better enable audiences to complete more steps of the empathetic and compassionate process. Some may be concerned that incorporating a reflection may diminish the aesthetic value of the piece or ruin the suspension of disbelief in theatre. However, this reflection can be done in a way that enhances instead of inhibiting the aesthetic strengths of the piece. For example, actors could lead this element while in character, or the director could use imagines, tableaux, or staging to aesthetically reinforce ideas from the play during the reflection time.

In conclusion, theatre and its strengths of fostering empathy and emotion could be channeled to lead to tangible social change (instead of stagnation as sometimes happens). Beyond the ideas of Brecht, lessons from Onwueme and psychological researchers have shown us that it is possible to balance distance and connection in a way that leads to empathy, compassion, and action. While there are ultimately an infinite number of ways to accomplish this in a piece of theatre, I offered a few ways for how directors might encourage audience members to go through the entire compassionate process, such as humanizing all characters, using staging and design that encourage imagination, and intentionally incorporating facilitation in production. Moving forward, it may be useful to test these ideas and options and investigate them further. It would also be beneficial to continue to ideate, explore, and learn from the

work of other theatre practitioners seeking to create activist theatre based in compassion.

While there is much more exploration to be done, it is my hope that we can be inspired by the great power of our art form to use compassion as a means to achieving justice for all human beings.

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