

“From the start it has been the theatre’s business to entertain people” (Bertolt Brecht)

Bertolt Brecht, an influential and revolutionary playwright, described art “not [as] a mirror to hold up to society, but a hammer with which to shape it”¹. With this statement, Brecht frames theatre, an important branch of art, as active and operational rather than passive and observational. He posits that art does not simply exist to reflect society’s constructs, or even to comment upon social happenings, but to actively inform and mould society and social beliefs. Brecht is certainly not the first theorist to identify theatre and story-telling as fundamental tools with which to shape humankind — Historically, entertainment and story-telling have often been labelled as practices fundamental to the creation of societies and the imagining of communal realities. Theatre is, and has long since been, at the very core of our ability to relate to life’s realities; role playing is arguably deeply integrated with our need for social acceptance. Rather than being a passive art form, theatre could be seen instead as instilling a form of passivity on the audience. In conventional theatre, the audience is forced into an observing, though not always reflective, silence.

Brecht’s plays draw the audience into the action onstage by breaking the fourth wall. The fourth wall separates the audience from the actors and in turn keeps the audience emotionally engaged; the fourth wall instigates the audience to be a part of the actor’s world. On the other hand breaking the fourth wall reminds the audience that they are watching a performance. This reminder leads to an objectivity in observing the actions on stage. Brecht’s reason for breaking the fourth wall was to keep his audience “objective and distant from emotional involvement so that they could make considered and rational judgements about any social comment or issues in his work.”² Brecht’s words on the purpose of theatre as “a business to entertain people”³ reflect his belief that instead of allowing a kind of escapism by getting lost in the world of the performers, it should serve as a reminder of the importance of being aware of the reality of the human condition. Through this separation, theatre creates a sense of distance that compels a broader perception of reality both through introspection as well as retrospection.

In light of his view on the active nature of art and theatre, Brecht’s statement that “from the start it has been the theatre’s business to entertain people” takes on a new tone. Entertainment becomes a medium through which a play may invoke emotion in an audience, engaging and sculpting them rather than lulling them into a disconnected observance of the performance. Theatre is the business of entertainment, in so far as it is the business of evoking change. This ability of theatre to entertain in a way that subliminally instigates and challenges a need for change in the human condition can be effectively explored in Ariel Dorfman’s *Death and the Maiden*. In the play, entertainment and evocation are inseparable from one another. The play leads the audience through a riveting commentary on the aftermath of a brutal, authoritarian dictatorship. With the use of **suspense, experimental breakage of the fourth wall, personal narratives, and dramatic asides**, *Death and the Maiden* wields entertainment as the “hammer with which to shape” its audience.

Death and the Maiden is an intensely political play, a commentary on the painful transition of an anonymous Latin American country from authoritarianism to democracy. The playwright, Ariel Dorfman, personally observed this transition in his home country of Chile, and wrote an extensive collection of nonfiction essays documenting the aftermath of the Chilean regime. Informed by Dorfman’s perspective as a survivor and activist, *Death and the Maiden* is an

¹ <https://quotepark.com/quotes/1131734-bertolt-brecht-art-is-not-a-mirror-to-hold-up-to-society-but-a-h/>

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zwmvd2p/revision/2>

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zwmvd2p/revision/2>

outstanding example of theatre's ability to entertain in a way that leads to introspection. While it describes and fictionalizes the agony of a country coming face to face with the brutalities committed by a now defunct state, the play also compels a sense of detachment from the audience as they watch the dramatic actions of the characters.

Death and the Maiden wields suspense and plot to draw the audience in its narrative, thus weaving together Brecht's notions of theatre as entertainment and as a "hammer with which to shape [society]". The play follows protagonist Paulina Salas and her husband Gerardo Escobar, who are living in secluded a house by the ocean. Their country has recently left behind a military dictatorship, under which Paulina is kidnapped, tortured, and assaulted. Over the course of the play, it becomes increasingly clear that she never receives justice for her victimization, and that she continues to grapple with her brutalization. Paulina's husband has recently been asked to lead a commission to look into the victims who were killed under the military regime; the fact that the commission will only investigate murders and not the many assaults committed against living victims is a clear continuation of the lack of justice Paulina encounters after her assault. When a stranger happens onto their remote house after helping her husband with a flat tire, Paulina becomes convinced that the man, Roberto, is the very same person who assaulted and tortured her during her time as a prisoner of the regime. Roberto agrees to spend the night at the Escobar's home and it is then that Paulina. She ties up and holds Roberto captive while he sleeps in their home and reveals to him and Gerardo that she will release him once he has confessed to the crimes he has committed against her. From the very first scene, the play is a gripping story of a seemingly paranoid woman and her rational husband who tries to pacify her fears. The entrance of a stranger adds to drama and reminds the audience of the fact that what they are watching is pure fiction.

Dorfman use of "an episodic plot and the *Verfremdungseffekt*"⁴ make the audience realize the drawbacks in each of the three characters and urge that "the audience should rise above such characters rather than be like them".⁵ The plot revolves around various episodes, such as Gerardo's flat tire, Paulina's suspicion of Roberto, Roberto being alone at his beach house. All of these episodic events come together to depict the deeper message of the consequences of totalitarianism. This idea of keeping focus on entertaining rather than on engaging, drives a willingness to introspect and question the very morality of the world they live in. While the audience may find Paulina's paranoia absurd, the fact that they are detached from her emotionally compels them to ponder on the human condition of vulnerability in the face of oppression.

The ambiguity of the setting in terms of the name of the country and time when the action takes place amplifies the entertainment value. The preface mentions the cast of characters and underneath is a note that informs "The time is present and the place, a country that is probably Chile but could be any country..."⁶ The plot with its edge of the seat tension, turns and twists is at its best a psychological thriller that adheres to the conventions of its genre. Following this plot, the audience sits in suspense as they struggle to unravel the truth from the possibility that Paulina's intense and unresolved trauma is obscuring her grasp on reality. In this sense, the play is highly entertaining and suspenseful. There is a high stakes mystery unfolding, with the life of Roberto (who may or may not be guilty) hanging in the balance. Entertainment thus becomes politicized as the play expresses the societal level of pain and unresolved grief post-authoritarianism through the character of Paulina. Through sheer entertainment, Dorfman hammers home a difficult reality by giving the audience a visceral and personal narrative to draw on.

⁴https://core.humanities.uci.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Bui_BeckettandBrecht.pdf

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⁶Death and the Maiden ISBN 978-0-14-024684-1

Death and the Maiden also entertains and draws in the audience through its experimental breakage of the fourth wall. This is done through the character of Gerado and the use of a mirror prop in the later scenes of the play. In many ways, the audience themselves are represented on stage by the character of Gerado, who, like them, is in the dark regarding whether or not Roberto is truly who Paulina has accused him of being. Gerado operates to both assuage and disrespect his wife and thus in doing so draws the audience into a level of involvement that causes slippage, though not an outright disintegration, of the fourth wall. His character also facilitates some of the slippage and later direct disintegration of the fourth wall. This breakage functions as a form of epic theatre, a Brechtian theatrical device that involves the alienation and distancing of the audience from the play in order to elicit a more “objective” response to its content. This alienation is done by an interruption of the play’s narrative, often through a direct addressal of the audience and the overall avoidance of illusion. Brecht argued that by reminding the audience that they are watching a play, one could hinder their development of empathy for the play’s characters and prevent the audience from having an emotional response. Brecht believed that this would give the audience enough distance from the play in order to objectively process its commentary on social issues and morality.

Later in the play, in Scene 2, Gerado directly breaks the fourth wall when “Gerado begins to talk to members of the audience, as if they were at the concert” (pg. 67)⁷. In a self-aggrandizing tone, Gerado describes his work on the government commission, saying “I always knew that our work would help in the process of healing, but I was surprised it would start on the very first day we convened” (pg. 67). With this direct addressal of the audience, Gerado disintegrates any illusion the audience might have built up regarding the play — Instead, they are abruptly reminded that they are watching a performance. Considering the political nature of the play, this breaking down of the fourth wall almost bestows a sense of responsibility on the audience — in reiterating that this is a play, Dorfman solicits a critical response from the audience, reminding them that theatre demands reactive spectators. This also serves to remind the audience that they are witnessing a form of entertainment, reiterating the business of theatre.

Any remaining illusions regarding the play’s nature are shattered in the final scenes of *Death and the Maiden*, when a mirror is lowered over the front of the play facing the audience: “Paulina and Roberto are covered from view by a giant mirror which descends, forcing the members of the audience to look at themselves... the spectators watch themselves in the mirror.” (pg. 66)⁸. The audience is viscerally reminded of where they are and what they’re doing — They are confronted with their reflections as they sit in the theatre hall, “forced” to look at themselves, but also at their surroundings. The use of the mirror also serves to alienate the audience from the characters in the play, reminding them that they are performers. It forms a physical, disruptive barrier between the stage and the spectators, demanding that the audience return to reality and reflect on what they’ve witnessed.

As is exemplified by Dorfman’s *Death and the Maiden*, Brecht’s statement regarding “theatre’s business to entertain” encompasses not just entertainment for the sake of enjoyment, but also entertainment to induce reflection. The play demonstrates the veracity of Brecht’s statement, as it comments on life and justice in a country that has recently left behind a military dictatorship. Over the course of the play, it becomes increasingly clear that Paulina never received justice for her victimization, and that she continues to grapple with her brutalization. Paulina’s husband has recently been asked to lead a commission to look into the victims who were killed under the military regime; the fact that the commission will only investigate murders and not the many assaults committed against living victims is a

⁷Dorfman, Ariel. “Scene 1, pg 67” *Death and the Maiden: A Play in Three Acts*, Nick Hern, London, 2011.

⁸Dorfman, Ariel. “Scene 2, pg 66” *Death and the Maiden: A Play in Three Acts*, Nick Hern, London, 2011.

clear continuation of the lack of justice Paula has encountered after her assault. *Death and the Maiden* thus broaches the question of restorative and transitional justice and demands that the audience linger over it. Using a dramatic, theatrical narrative and its direct addressal of the audience, the play keeps them hyper-aware of the fact that they're watching a performance made for their entertainment. Simultaneously, it propels the audience into an introspective, reflective state, raising important questions with real world implications. The spectators are left coated in the residues of thought-provoking entertainment, drawn in by their amusement and then confronted with the image of themselves in the mirror.