



**Brechtian Epic Theatre Techniques
A Comparative Study of Alfred Farag's
Sulayman's al- Halabi and Iakovos
Kampanellis' our Grand Circus**

By

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This paper is an attempt to examine how the Egyptian versatile playwright, Alfred Farag (1929-2005), and the father of modern Greek theater, Iakovos Kampanellis (1921- 2011) used the Brechtian epic theatre techniques in their plays. These techniques are the epic devices that are manipulated for distancing the spectators from the characters on stage so as not to be captured by their actions and this would permit the so-called "alienation effect". According to Bertold Brecht, this effect creates a distance to achieve the audience's critical thinking instead of just entertainment.

Introduction: The Birth of Brecht's Theatre

Before the epic drama, the naturalistic drama deprived its spectators of their own emotions and thoughts, guiding them into an illusionary world that does not exist, making identify themselves with the protagonists, with their thought and their feelings. When the play story unfolds, the spectators just eavesdrop to what is happening on stage for just entertainment through their emotional catharsis. This sort of entertainment makes the spectators think and feel through the characters' "thoughts and feelings, not aware of their own reality" (Esslin 119). In addition, the performers are not "aware of the spectators and an invisible wall (the fourth wall) separates these two realities" (Leach 109).

Thus, Bertolt Brecht called for the foundation of the epic theatre stressing that the theatre must have its techniques for tearing down this fourth wall in order to facilitate the audience's visibility so as not to be captured by the characters and this would permit the so-called "alienation effect", or the process of non-identification. This was easily achieved by having the actors narrating directly to the audience using techniques like the asides (*aparté*) or making direct

questions to the spectators to directly create a connection between the stage and the audience. But, at the same time, the audience is not captured by the action on stage. This way the play has become free from suspense or a climax and the spectator motivated to think rationally not artificially by the performance. This incites the spectators to "react to their current political - economical state" (Kiralyfalvi 2015 26). Esslin states that the pleasure that Brecht's theatre was giving the audience was:

The pleasure we feel when we discover new truths,
the exhilaration we experience when we enlarge our
understanding. In this scientific age Brecht wanted
his audience to experience some of the exaltation
felt by the scientist who has uncovered one of the
mysteries of the universe (112).

Thus Brecht's dramaturgy attempts not to simply "interpret the world, but actually help people to change it?" (Leach 116). This makes the audience able to understand the underlying message that the dramatic work wants to convey. Thus, Brecht viewed that, "The spectator could be led to the correct conclusion by the evidence presented" (Chinna 94).

In order to avoid the illusionary world of the naturalistic drama, Brecht introduced the "V-effect" in which the illusion of reality is evaded in order to achieve the audience's critical thinking. Thus, Brecht appropriated a new narrative mode which changes the mode of narrative from authorial to multiple narratives. This new form of drama could make the theatre "respond to the political battles of the

moment" (Brandt 2002 254). Brecht was convinced that theatre does not merely aim to provide entertainment, but to act as a platform or pulpit for lecture stimulating social change. Thus, theatre should provide the spectators with food for thought in order to understand the issues of their lives.

Epic Theatre Techniques

The analysis of the two under-discussion plays: *Sulaymān's al-Ḥalabī* and *Our Grand Circus*, is mainly based on Brecht's theories about epic theatre techniques. Accordingly, shedding some light on these techniques, which make the audience evade the illusion of reality and think critically, is a must .

In the trend of the epic theatre, the manipulation of chorus as a narrator of the story, directly addressing the public, is a major epic theatre technique to make the spectators distanced from the performance. The main narrator or the authorial narrative disappears but the narration appears in small parts played by the play characters or the chorus. The chorus not only describes and comments on the events, but it also participates in the events providing an illuminating account of the performance for the audience. All the above-mentioned theoretical notions of Brecht's alienation techniques were used to challenge "the old theatre "(El-Sayyid 1995 168).

Another narrative technique to make the spectators distanced from the performance is to manipulate the episodic scenes instead of the plot as:

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, like the favourite chapters of a novel that can be read by themselves (Esslin 113).

The epic theatre technique of historization is created when the events taking place on stage have already happened in reality. The vitrine of these past events enables the playwrights to make direct political insinuations to the present; these insinuations are seen from a new perspective. At a time when the censorship bans antidictatorial playwrights to present their messages to the audience freely, historization is a good strategy to shelter these playwrights from the censorship's attacks. This epic technique could make the stage "respond to the political battles of the moment" (Brandt 2002 254) .

This paper tries to cover the following questions: In what way can we consider these plays to be Brechtian plays? How did the two under-discussion playwrights use the Brecht's techniques in their plays? In highlighting such notions, the two plays under study can be analyzed in the light of the Brechtian epic theatre techniques.

Epic Theatre Techniques in Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī and Our Grand Circus

From the fifties on, Brecht was known and appreciated in the Egyptian theatrical panorama. Muhammad Mustafa Badawi mentions some epic trends in many of the Egyptian plays highlighting the formal devices that are derived from the "Brechtian techniques" (1987 179). In his most plays, Farag as an epic theatre

practitioner shows his concern with Brecht's theories— and Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī in particular. Farag declared that:

Using tradition as a theatrical framework [...] implies a clear intention to reformulate the present life through the reformulation of tradition. The selective attitude to the tradition is necessarily critical and dialectal. Using tradition as a framework to introduce contemporary issues establishes an attitude to the present and to the past (Farag 1995 319).

The above-mentioned lines illustrate the influence of Brecht on Farag's theater as well as "the element of epic theater that Farag employed in his plays written in the sixties" (Amin 321). In the play Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī, the Brechtian chorus is first and foremost a narrative voice, which is used as a technique of distancing or an alienating voice. The chorus declares its narrative voice, from the very beginning of the play, through the assertion: "And here our story begins" (Farag 24). In its more general form, Farag's chorus is composed of forces (actants), not individualized, whose multiple voices are used like a narrator bringing new materials. Thus, the chorus plays the role of an omniscient, omnipresent and trustworthy narrator who tells word for word and letter for letter. THE CHORUS:" [...] And this was our story, that we told you tonight, word by word, letter by letter" (Farag 157) .

In comparison to the old monophonic account with its partiality voice, the chorus provides a multi-part objective narration of facts. The multiple voices of the epic chorus offer an alternative voice for the story. In addition, it exposes and comments on facts, which also collaborates with the public to interpret and construct the story. In *Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī*, the chorus raises the importance of the character through a statement that is affirmed and that will be confirmed some time later by the chorus: " CHORUS: Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī, a name that has not a distinctive quality, yet. Sheikh Šarqāwī asked: who? And he was answered: Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī" (79) .The chorus further raises the importance of the character when Sulaymān presents himself to Sheikh Sadat's wife, she also repeats his name:

SULAYMĀN: My name is Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī.

SĀDĀT'S WIFE: Sulaymān? ... Al-Ḥalabī? I still
can't remember you.

CHORUS: Didn't it ever come to your mind that
people could call it 'Sulaymān al-Ḥalaby's tree'?
(110).

The chorus also has a lot of functions to do as it is made evident in the psychological investigation on Sulaymān. In addition, at the end of the play, visual imagery is well developed in the chorus' last talk. In this case, Sulaymān is compared to birds singing on the tree of knowledge:

CHORUS: As long as birds tweet on the tree, hope will seek with its shadow for my song from the wind of the quarter, to reassure. From the cannons' mouths of the ships the tragedy went off... then, at last, they returned to the shades of these tender flourishing branches so that the last words can be written (Faraġ 156-7).

The status of the chorus as a narrator is further made manifest when it helps Sulaymān to express his subconscious: "CHORUS: God willing, you will heal. No matter of the headache, the nausea or the daze you can feel, your recovery will be listening to your inner self closely" (Faraġ 86). This is done to access Sulaymān's subconscious and "to acquaint the audience with the character of Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī" (El-Sayyid 1995 173).

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The chorus as a narrating voice, which interprets the story is made manifest when it shifts to directly address the public, who is invited to judge its story :

CHORUS: [...] And this was our story, that we told
you tonight, word by word, letter by letter.

And so, the case ended up in the court.

Judges of this court, do not judge by law, judge by
justice! (157).

The chorus, further, has the possibility to cross the fourth wall when it appears amongst the events which are exposed within the play. As proof of the chorus' singular status, Dina Amin hesitates between "defining the chorus as Sulaymān's subconscious or the author's voice" (2008 90). El-Sayyid claims that, during an interview, Farag gave some elucidations about his idea of the chorus:

Farag admits that he followed the epic technique in using the chorus, the narrator, music, songs, decor, screen and masks. The chorus not only describes and comments on the events, but it also participates in the events and sometimes in dialectic. In addition, it introduces characters and announces its view about events and provides an illuminating account of the performance for the audience. In doing so, the

chorus is a participant in the theatrical action, one which intervenes in events whenever need arises. It asks, interprets and argues. This creates a state of detachment between the audience and the stage in order to give the audience the context to contemplate the presented issue and to perceive its dialectic. (El-Sayyid 1995 166-7).

Likewise, in Kampanellis' 'Our Grand Circus, the chorus is a major technique of its epic structure that is used to produce the much desired V-effect. As it is previously-mentioned, the chorus as an epic technique has the power to directly address the public. In addition, it reveals the inner thoughts of the characters when it transports the public to an inner part of the character.

In the Circus, The chorus is shown in the form of two presenters or narrators that were commenting on the sociopolitical context of each episode. The presenters or the narrators participate not only in the introductory scene but also in-between the episodes, helping the spectators understand the different periods that the play wanders. For example, without the assistance of these narrators in the episode of "3d of September", the episode could not have been performed. The Brechtian epic theatre techniques are made evident when the two presenters address the audience directly, "Kyries kai Kyrioi" (ladies and gentlemen) eleven times with a direct question from Romiaki and the song included (Kampanellis19-25).

In the end of the fourth episode, "The coming of King Otto", the non-corrupted captain of the revolution addresses his "metaphorical" speech to the audience, instructing them to be united : " Greeks stay together. They want to divide us. They didn't come to govern with justice but with discord" (Kampanellis 1978 55). Throughout the whole play, the Brecht's technique of the "asides", (*aparté*) is used thirty nine times in total when the audience is being addressed directly by the performers, either as "ladies and gentlemen" or as direct, rhetorical, questions. , are used one time from Romios and one from Romiaki (Kampanellis 46).

The epic trend is made evident when Farag chooses the narrative mood which replaces the authorial narration of historiography. In Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī, the narration is divided into different voices or polyphony which is outlined by a chorus acting as an omniscient narrator. The different voices of the narration have the right to speak and bring new materials to instruct the audience. Thus, within this feature, different characters each express their own point of view. This is made evident when these different characters express their own point of view on the charismatic character of Sādāt when he leaves his home, by force because of the French soldiers , which contributes to the effect of alienation: "VOICES: Where? May God protect you, our lord! Turn to us, your kindness. Say a word to your sons and disciples" (41).

The multiple voices of the chorus allow the spectators to delineate a portrait of Farag's hero.. Sometime before and after 1967, "Arabic Literature produced many heroes affirming that the individual alone is master of his own existence, even if he is against the social values of the group" (Vauthier 2007 124) .

To achieve Brecht's policy of narrative in the Grand Circus, the play narrative is divided into 14 episodes and an introductory scene passes through different eras and moments of the Greek history. These 14 episodes of the narrative had not been put in a linear chronological order but had been mixed in a non-chronological order, the meaning is maintained in the end in its total regardless the linear narration. Thus narrative of the play is built up to be "a cyclical and analytic narrative rather than linear and inevitable sequence" (Steen 257).

As the epic theatre uses cyclical and analytical narrative, not linear and inevitable sequence, the spectators are required to link the various episodes from various historical periods even if they were not in chronological order. This way the consciousness of the spectators is given an active role to make connections and links themselves to reach the intended meaning of the play. Thus, it is noted that *Our Grand Circus* was "too one dimensional to be Brechtian and acted with a variety of techniques on the spectators' sentiment" (Steen 288).

The above-mentioned epic technique of historization is traced in the play of Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī to rewrite the past story of Sulaymān, the Syrian young man who kills Kleber, the French General, from a fresh and skeptical perspective. Farag manipulates particular snapshots of history to convey a message in the present time. This makes the censors incompetent to grasp Farag's clever way of making Kleber mirror the negative side of Nasser's rule, while Sulaymān represents some of his positive features. Through the symbolism and allegory of the historization technique, the Farag's play criticizes the system. This is made evident when depicting

breaches in the character of Sulaymān, which is a reference to Nasser's character. This happens when Sulaymān seems to have forgotten his Syrian identity and speaks of Cairo as if it were his country:

SULAYMĀN: Here, from this high mound of wasteland I can see the whole of Cairo. O what a great city it is, and yet how wretched! Cairo, my homeland, the source of my thoughts and hopes, the beating heart of all the Arabs. How I hate you, how you fill me with nausea (Badawi 1987 175).

Further negative reference to Nasser's character is created when he is depicted like Kleber who rules behind the name of the French Revolution dictates. Similarly, Nasser's military dictatorship was masquerading as the rule of the people .

Like Nasser, Sulaymān clearly thinks himself a son of the Arab Nationalism. He is an "Arab nationalist who sees Egypt and Syria as one nation" (Amin 2008 88). In other cases, like Nasser, Sulaymān seems like a hero with a deep psychology and some intellectual features: "SULAYMĀN: But the strangest thing in this country is I... The chased, the weak, the suspicious. My real prize is absolute knowledge" (142).

When the censors are competent to grasp Kleber as a negative image of the President, Faraġ is flanked by a positive idea of the same person represented by the hero, Sulaymān. Sulaymān, like Nasser and like Saladin (a symbol that had already been used to represent Nasser), is an Arab fighter for justice against the Western

menace. Through this double system of references reminding us of Nasser, Farag could highlight both positive and negative actions of Nasser's administration .

The historization technique is further reflected when some scenes from the play are reminiscent of Egypt during the sixties and particularly, the impact of the despotic government on the life of its people; Other scenes allude to the metamorphoses of humans into dogs under the despotic rule in the contemporary context, which was "a recurrent motif in the plays of the sixties fits well Farag's work " (Selaiha 2004).

SULAYMĀN: Is it a life what people live? No, death is better than such a life [...]. We wear shame and eat regret and dangerous ideas dig our minds. Evil eyes follow each man like snakes loosed by wizards to his dining table to prevent him from eating and to his work to distract him from it, to his bed to plant thorns there. Then the Gates of Hell are flung open, hell becoming our daily life routine. The pulse of blood coursing in our veins seems to say: 'Kneel and submit... Surrender your manhood to humiliation, and your children to hunger's fangs of and your neighbor's neck to the gallows (67-8).

It is noted that the previous passage is reminiscent of a modern police state Likewise, "the checkpoint scenes and frisks" (41-2) of the French which are more reminiscent of Farag's Egypt than of the French domination. Therefore, the play describes an experience familiar to Farag's contemporary context but alien to the historical context of the play .

The historical description of Egyptian life under the tyrannical ruler of the French imperialists represented Nasser's presidency of the Egyptian Republic at Farag's time. Thus, Egyptians could "recognize aspects of life under the dictatorship of Nasser" (Badawi 1987 175). Thus the general Kleber in Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī embodies the ruler who possesses features making him an "allegory of President Nasser" (El-Enany 2000 181). What can be concluded that "these concepts were already in Farag's mind in 1954, when he wrote that history was a framework for contemporary issues to be reflected on through theatre " (Farag [1954] 2002 74). Influenced by the epic theatre, Farag masked the above-mentioned political ideas and messages in a past narrative as a strategy to maintain some freedom of expression evading political restrictions as" the autonomy of the Egyptian cultural field after 1952 was minimal " (Mehrez 2008 16-17).

Similarly, the historical scenes that Kampanellis chose to make in the Grand Circus help the spectators to construct a message to the audience, which is also the purpose of the play. This message conveys that patterns of continuous oppressions either from Greek or foreign oppressors are continuous throughout the Greek history and the spectators are required to discover them while they watch the performance that is structured an episodic way .Thus, what can be

understood is that Kampanellis was targeting to an uprising of the modern Greek oppressed by the junta:

this continuous unfolding of repressive history further demystified the past and posited its performative demands for a revolution in the present. Revolutions tend to assess the past anew, and Modern Greek Theater was a catalyst to that process' (Steen 2015 33).

As mentioned earlier, historicization of events stressed that the contemporary 1970's story of oppression was one in a series of many that repeatedly were happening in Greece from antiquity to modern times. This is made manifest in the eighth episode or "The statue" which refers to the statue of one of the greatest warriors of the revolution against the Ottomans, Theodoros Kolokotronis. In this scene, the statue narrates in detail what was happening the times around the revolution of September the 3rd and the demand of the first constitution. These past insinuations refer to the current political situation of Greece of the '70s. "You are going to loose the constitution [...] Why do you think that they stopped celebrating the 3d of September! They are taking it there slowly" (267) .

In a long monologue, the statue is trying to awake the Greeks of 1970 telling them to forget the old glories and start a new fight for their freedom "Go ahead and forget of us" (Kampanellis 86-93). This monologue alludes to the practice of the junta who were trying to hypnotize the Greeks with the glory of the revolution in 1821 and the glorious past of the ancient Greeks. Another example is made

evident in the end of the fourth episode, "The coming of King Otto", in which the non-corrupted captain of the revolution addresses his metaphorical speech to the audience, instructing them to be united: "Greeks stay together. They want to divide us. They didn't come to govern with justice but with discord" (Kampanellis 55).

Through the technique of historicization, Kampanellis could say freely everything he wanted about the Colonels of the junta, replacing them with an oppressor of the past and covering contemporary political comments behind the words of historical personalities. Furthermore, the narrative was in the form of episodes:

submitted the play with the episodes in the wrong chronological order. Moreover, many other episodes were written "such way in purpose to be cut and function as safeguards for others. Such episodes were not destined to be performed at first place "(Vassilopoulos).

In a similar way, within the stories of the past, Farag and Iakovos are able to "speak about the present. In Brechtian perspective, the epic serves the two functions: relating events to history on one level and relating to everyday life on another. Hence, they described the events of the past to allude to the present which enables him to evade censorship. Moreover, the events of the alienated history provide the context for the audience to observe the events from a distance to" contemplate and think about what he sees before him, and to establish a link between the past and the present "(El-Sayyid 1995 172).

Conclusion

As the under-discussion plays follow the epic trend, no place is allowed for sentimentalism, nor for judgment or for plots. The story has been showed; at the end of it, the audience must think about it, reflect on it. By doing so, both of these two playwrights demand from their audience to "provoke their critical thinking and hence, reaction" (Arseni 304). Hence, throughout the whole play, *Our Grand Circus* the audience is being addressed directly from the performers. Thus, it is argued that Kampanellis' play is a Greek version of epic theatre as the German dramaturge defined and applied it in his own plays (Esslin 107).

This paper attempts to highlight how are, both of the playwrights, influenced by Brecht's dramaturgy and epic theatre's techniques. Both of them applied Brecht's new way of awakening the audience through the epic theatre techniques which enhance the alienation of the audience from the play characters to think critically. Furthermore, these techniques make their spectators understand their contemporary reality through the past stories in order to "contribute and boost the upcoming uprising" (Esslin 132-133). Since the majority of Brecht's epic theatre dramaturgical techniques can be found in Farag's and Kampanellis' plays, thus it is concluded that *Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī* and *Our Grand Circus* are examples of epic theatre as both of them "found a possible answer to Brecht's questions" (Brecht 116).

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