



Playbuilding with Bertolt Brecht

Wil Baker

Unit Overview

Playbuilding with Bertolt Brecht

Stage 5 Drama Year 9 - Term 3

This unit introduces and allows students to explore and understand the power of Political Theatre, through the experiential study of Bertolt Brecht and Epic Theatre. Students will learn the history, techniques, conventions and purpose of Epic Theatre as developed by Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956). Students will come to realize how theatre can be used to influence the way an audience thinks about social or historical issues and ideas. While exploring the techniques of Epic Theatre through various resources, stimuli, warm ups and exercises, students will play-build and work in groups towards the creation of an original performance piece based on the topic of *Injustice*. This 5-7 minute piece will be performed to selected students and teachers at the end of Term 3 and becomes the Group Devised Assessment for the unit. Individual student Logbooks will form part of the assessment, giving students the opportunity to document and critically reflect on the playbuilding process and performance outcomes.

The unit runs over 30 x 50 minute lessons over 10 weeks, plus performances over two lunchtimes to selected students and teachers. The audience will provide interactive feedback immediately after each performance.

This unit satisfies several areas of Cross Curriculum Content including...

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)

Aboriginal and Indigenous

Difference and Diversity

Gender

Key Competencies

Literacy

Numeracy

This unit satisfies the Essential Content (playbuilding) of the Stage 5 Drama Syllabus and incorporates other Dramatic Contexts including....

Improvisation

Political/protest theatre

Creative movement

Scripted drama

Mime

Nambucca Heads High School Assessment Notification
Year 9. Term 3. Assessment Task #1

Topic: A group devised dramatic performance based upon the Epic Theatre techniques of Bertolt Brecht.

Weighting: 25% (of marks for whole year)

Due Dates: Performance - Week 10 Term 3, Logbook - Week 10 Term 3.

Task Description - Performance (15% of overall mark) 5-7 minutes

In groups of 4-6, students are required to perform an original piece of political/protest theatre using the techniques of Bertolt Brecht and Epic Theatre. The theme for the piece is *Injustice*. Ideas are to be discussed with teacher.

Groups are expected to work collaboratively to conceive, research, devise, playbuild, script, rehearse and perform their piece using: 1. Three or more dramatic techniques. 2. The theatrical techniques of Bertolt Brecht and Epic Theatre that will be taught during the term.

Higher marks will be achieved for groups that pay particular attention to the Brechtian techniques relating to narration, gestus, placards, song, poetry, costume, props, alienation effect, character movement and voice and relationship with the audience (fourth wall).

Performances will be at lunchtime in the Drama Space for selected students and teachers wishing to attend. No scripts will be permitted on stage. Costume needs to be rehearsal blacks, however, key *fragment* costume items and props can be used. Discuss with teacher first.

Task Description - Written (10% of overall mark)

Logbook: Each student needs to keep a record of any information in relation to this unit including stimulus/inspiration materials such as images, quotes, poems, songs, films, etc. You must also include ongoing reflections of your group's process in researching playbuilding, devising, scripting, rehearsing and performing your piece. Also include a reflection about the audience feedback. Songs, poetry and narration and script must be included in your Logbook.

Marking Criteria

Each student will be assessed individually on their creative input, energy and commitment to the collaborative, playbuilding process within their group. In performance, each student will be marked on their focus, use of expressive skills and portrayal of character/role in relation to what you have learnt about Epic Theatre.

The group will be assessed as an ensemble and individually. Your group will be marked on the overall success of the piece, the use of dramatic elements; Brecht's Epic Theatre techniques, directorial choices, cohesive structure and the ability to effectively convey a strong, political message to the audience.

Making: 5.1.1, 5.1.2, 5.1.3, 5.1.4 Performing: 5.2.1, 5.2.2, 5.2.3 Appreciating: 5.3.1, 5.3.2, 5.3.3

Unit Sequence

Based on Nambucca Heads High School bi-weekly timetable.

WEEK	LESSON	LESSON PLAN
1	1	<p>After holidays, Re-establish class dynamic as an ensemble. Warm up: Group (ensemble) bonding games.</p> <p>Establish prior knowledge about Political Theatre. <i>What do you think Political Theatre could be?</i></p> <p>The Unit overview is discussed: <i>Dramatic performance based upon the EPIC THEATRE techniques of Bertolt Brecht. Topic: Injustice.</i></p> <p>Introduction to Political Theatre. Show 5-minute film: playwrights talking about Political Theatre... https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCyvfScSuBE&list=PLCm7GbpeJhDppDumPOnSNITxIQ6WCB1</p> <p>Introduce two significant practitioners: Augusto Boal (Theatre of The Oppressed) Bertolt Brecht (Epic Theatre).</p> <p>Reiterate the importance of writing in Logbook.</p>
	2	<p>Warm up: Trust/group building games. Recap: What is Political Theatre?</p> <p>Show film to introduce Epic Theatre conventions... https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ic3PMn_G05w</p> <p>Display the summary outline of Brecht and Epic Theatre on the large screen. Ask students to read out sections aloud as if to an audience.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Write Brechtian techniques in Logbooks.</i></p>
	3	<p style="text-align: center;">ENSEMBLE MOVEMENT</p> <p>Developing the ensemble: Group character movement exercises. (Clausen p.135-138).</p>
2	4	<p>The use of placards and narration in Epic theatre.</p> <p>Stimulus: Tiananmen Square tank man... https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-nXT8lSnPQ</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(See Lesson Plan 4 for details)</p>

WEEK	LESSON	LESSON PLAN
	<p>5-6</p> <p>CHARACTER MOVEMENT & VOICE</p>	<p>Warm up: Character movement (Clausen p. 177) <i>The Caucasian Chalk Circle</i> extract</p> <p>Focus on Brechtian techniques of character movement and voice. (Clausen p.178 Performing in documentary Drama)</p>
	<p>7</p> <p>TABLEAUX & GESTUS</p>	<p>Recap Brechtian techniques. Introducing Tableaux and Gestus.</p> <p>(See Lesson Plan 7 for details)</p>
3	<p>8</p> <p>POETRY & SONG</p>	<p>Students put into Assessment Performance Groups (AGPs). Four-Six students per group.</p> <p>Students view: http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/video/a-popular-play-spectacle</p> <p>(See Lesson Plan 8 for details)</p>
	<p>9</p> <p>SYMBOLISM MASK PROPS COSTUME</p>	<p>APGs devise a poem and/or song to send a political message on injustice. Perform to class.</p> <p>Students learn about Brechtian techniques of fragmentary costume and props (single objects representing a larger picture or setting).</p> <p>(See Lesson Plan 9 for details)</p>
	<p>10</p> <p>A BRECHT PLAY READING IN EPIC STYLE</p>	<p>Students and teacher do a read-through of a Brecht play, changing roles, miming, using props, singing lines and improvising as they go through it.</p>
4	<p>11</p> <p>PLAYBUILDING BASED ON EPIC THEATRE TECHNIQUES & GROUP DEVISE</p>	<p>Show 10-minute student Epic Theatre production about rising university fees and discuss the conventions used... https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K013rAY_P2k</p> <p>APG's discuss how they might use Brechtian techniques in their Epic Theatre Assessment Task performance.</p> <p>Play the music track that will be the stimulus material for the next few lessons: <i>Famine and the Death of A Mother</i> by <i>Lowercase Noises</i>.</p> <p><i>T: Take notes while listening and write down the images and feelings this music triggers in you for the next lesson.</i></p>

WEEK	LESSON	LESSON PLAN
	12-13 PLAYBUILDING BASED ON EPIC THEATRE TECHNIQUES & GROUP DEVISE	In their AGPs, students have the next three lessons to devise, playbuild and perform a 1-minute Epic Theatre performance based on the music stimulus: <i>Famine and the Death of A Mother</i> by Lowercase Noises. (See Lesson Plan 12-13-for details)
	14 PLAYBUILDING BASED ON EPIC THEATRE TECHNIQUES & GROUP DEVISE	Continue on from Lessons 12-13 AGPs continue to playbuild and design an Epic Theatre performance based on the music: <i>Famine and the Death of A Mother</i> . Performance and peer assessment/ discussion of group performances: <i>Famine and the Death of A Mother</i> . This is practice run for the Assessment Task. Group devised performance ideas discussed. <i>Injustice topic must be chosen by start of next week.</i>
5	15	Injustice topics locked in. APGs brainstorm and focus on playbuilding/developing the ideas for performance. Logbook unofficial assessment. Hand out Assessment Task 1
	17	APGs playbuilding/developing ideas for performance.
	18	Groups playbuild and rehearse for Epic theatre performance.
6	19	Work in progress: APG's perform to class for feedback.
	20-21	Groups playbuild and rehearse for Epic theatre performance.
	22	Groups playbuild and rehearse for Epic theatre performance.
7	19	Groups playbuild and rehearse for Epic theatre performance.
	20	Groups playbuild and rehearse for Epic theatre performance.
	21	Work in progress: APG's perform to class for feedback.
8	22	Groups playbuild and rehearse for Epic theatre performance.
	22-23	Groups playbuild and rehearse for Epic theatre performance.
	25	Groups playbuild and rehearse for Epic theatre performance.
9	26	Groups playbuild and rehearse for Epic theatre performance.
	27	Groups playbuild and rehearse for Epic theatre performance.
	28	Groups playbuild and rehearse for Epic theatre performance.
10	29	Groups playbuild and rehearse for Epic theatre performance.
	30-31	Final rehearsals to class and feedback.
	Lunchtime Performance 1	Performances to students/teachers including feedback.
	Lunchtime Performance 2	Performances to students/teachers including feedback. <i>Logbooks due next lesson.</i>
	32	Reflection on performances. Students submit Logbooks.

Lessons 4. **Narration and placards**

Teaching Resources

Projector, cables, internet access, still images.

Context

This lesson introduces students to the Brechtian techniques of narration and using placards to tell the story and 'alienate' the audience.

Targeted Outcomes

5.1.1, 5.1.2, 5.1.3, 5.1.4, 5.2.2, 5.2.3, 5.3.1, 5.3.2, 5.3.3

Lesson Sequence

Roll call and Warm Up (10mins)

Concentration (10mins)

Introduce the Brechtian techniques of narration and placards to communicate information directly to the audience and remind them that they are watching a play (breaking the fourth wall).



Ask students to explain the image about the accident provided.

T: How would you write that briefly on a placard?

Teacher writes student suggestion below the image.

T: Placards can introduce location, time and/or character. Other placards can indicate the attitude and internal thoughts of the characters.

T: What might a brief placard say about the policeman in this scene?

E.g. Police Ravi cannot believe his luck, when the two thieves fall at his feet!

T: Or is it the point of view of a motorcycle rider?

(Idea: Phil Baker)

Skill Teaching & Practice (15mins)

Briefly discuss the events that led up to the Tiananmen Square Massacre tank-man standoff in 1988. Show clip... <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-nXT8lSnPQ>

Leave still image projected on large screen upstage.



In groups of 4-5, they are to devise 3 pieces of short detached narration that tell the story behind the clip: *before, now and after*. If there is enough time, students may also write some lines from the point of view of a character from the image, one that talks to the audience about their political place in the story (**FOCUS**).

(Idea: Phil Baker)

Sharing & Reflection (15mins)

Each group performs.
Discuss positives and areas of improvement.
Notes taken in workbooks.

T: *Did the narration inform us and take the story forward?*

T: *How could the narration be improved (brevity, clarity)?*

T: *Why would Brecht think this was a useful technique in his plays?*

Answers: informed the audience, announced a scene change, made comments about the action on stage, making the message clear, breaking the fourth wall.

Homework task

Write at least 6 placards that represent scenes from your daily life.

Lesson 7. Gestus and Tableaux

Teaching Resources

Laptop, images, AV Projector, cables, internet access.

Context

Students learn techniques to help with playbuilding their performance.

Targeted Outcomes

5.1.1, 5.1.2, 5.1.3, 5.1.4, 5.2.2, 5.2.3, 5.3.1, 5.3.2, 5.3.3

Lesson Sequence

Roll call and Warm Up (10mins)

Split class into two groups. Students create movement to define two opposing armies, loggers and protesters, conservative church congregation and liberal music singing congregation, school of fish and pack of sharks, politicians' dinner and starving refugees.

Teacher calls *freeze* at random.

T: Now exaggerate that frozen moment. Express it more with levels, gesture, expression and attitude. This is what Brecht calls Gestus.

Concentration (10mins)

T: Epic Actors serve as narrators and demonstrators. They retell events, demonstrate with actions to help the audience understand the situation. Brecht wanted his actors to always remember that they are an actor portraying another's emotions, feelings and experiences.

To assist in achieving this, Brecht often used a technique called Gestus. Gestus was a gesture or position that an actor would take up at crucial sections in the play. The gesture or action aimed to encapsulate the feelings of the character at the one time, and also briefly stopped the action. The most famous Gestus ever used was in Brecht's Mother Courage where the character of Mother Courage looks out to the audience, her face posed in a silent scream.

(Source: USQ Artworks School Resources, The Good Woman of Szechwan teachers' notes)

Discussion about Tableaux and Gestus...

Three students are told (secretly) to walk on stage as soldiers. The class is to guess who they are and tell how they came to that conclusion.

Five students told to walk on stage as citizens/villagers during a war. The soldiers interact with the citizens as their protector. No words can be spoken but sounds can be made.

The soldiers exit the stage, are told to return as the invading army and interact with the citizens as enemies. No words can be spoken but sounds can be made.

Teacher and class discuss the way the soldiers changed and how this was reflected in their voices, attitudes, expressions, gestures, postures and movement (**TENSION**).

Skill Teaching & Practice (15mins)



Display these images and discuss feelings/thoughts.

T: What do these images trigger in your mind?

T: Where is the injustice theme in these images?

T: What are the opposing points of view?

T: What could be the message being conveyed in these images?

In their AGPs, students create a 1-2-minute piece based on one of these images that conveys a message about the injustice portrayed. Groups can choose one or both points of view to convey the message. Performance must use mime, slow motion, ensemble movement and gestus.

(Idea: Phil Baker)

Sharing and Reflection (15mins)

T: As an audience, did we understand the performer's point of view or message?

T: What worked in the performance? Where could it be improved?

T: What is the effect of Gestus on the audience?

Homework:

Logbook: Reflect on what you have learnt in this lesson and how it could be applied to your upcoming assessment task.

Lesson 8. Poetry and Song

Teaching Resources

Laptop, AV Projector, cables, internet access.

Context

Students learn the skills to incorporate poetry and song into their Epic theatre performances.

Targeted Outcomes

5.1.1, 5.1.2, 5.1.3, 5.1.4, 5.2.2, 5.2.3, 5.3.1, 5.3.2, 5.3.3

Lesson Sequence

Roll call and Warm Up (10mins)

Privilege Game.

Split class into two halves, facing each other. First half are the dominant people in this world. They can have anything they want. They tell the second half (submissive people) why they deserve to be given certain items and the *submissives* should not have them. E.g. free ice cream at lunchtime, new clothes while the others only get old clothes, a brand new house while the others have only tents, etc. Each time, the submissive people plead with the dominant people and give reasons why they should have these things. Reverse the groups at some point.

(Idea: Phil Baker)

Concentration (10mins)

T: What did you learn from that warm up exercise?

Students should respond that there are two sides to an issue and they may both be valid, however, whoever dominates through power or privilege will always get what they want.

T: How might people's ideas be changed peacefully, so there is less injustice in the world?

Through film, books and theatre.

T: This was Brecht's intention when he developed Epic Theatre. And as Brecht was a poet, poetry and music are important parts of his Epic Theatre.

Play and discuss the UK National Theatre clip about the spectacle of Brecht's theatre and note the use of song.... <http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/video/a-popular-play-spectacle>

Skills Teaching & Practice (15mins)

The below images are projected onto the screen.



Aborigines in chains 1906 (www.janesoceania.com)



Settlers 1906 (www.slwa.gov.au)

Discuss the images. Break students in to their APGs and divide class into two halves. Using the two images for inspiration, each APG writes a poem/song that represents the point of view of either the Aborigines or the settlers or any opposing groups. Create three tableaux and symbolic mime to go with the poem or song (**SYMBOL**).

(Idea: Phil Baker)

Sharing and Reflection (15mins)

Two opposing groups on stage together and take positions facing the audience. Each poem is performed in turn.

T: *What worked in the performance?*

T: *What did the combined pieces make you think?*

T: *As an audience, were you convinced by either side?*

T: *Poetry and song, used in this way to provoke the audience to think, is a convention of Epic Theatre that would be useful in your assessment task.*

Homework: *Search the internet for historical issues of injustice between two opposing groups.*

Lessons 9. **Costume and props in EPIC THEATRE**

Teaching Resources

News article handouts, costumes, props, masks.

Context

This period gives students the opportunity to explore the use of mask, props and costume.

Targeted Outcomes

5.1.1, 5.1.2, 5.1.3, 5.1.4, 5.2.2, 5.2.3, 5.3.1, 5.3.2, 5.3.3

Lesson Sequence

Roll call and Warm-up (10mins)

Students go into costume/prop (including masks) room and select one item. Return to the space as a character inspired by that item. Teacher side coaches students around the room, placing them in different social situations where they must interact. When finished place all items in a pile in the space.

Concentration (10 mins)

Discuss Brecht use of mask, costume and props in terms of symbolism and also for alienation effect. Four students act out a 1 minute altered version of the three little pigs story. They are then asked to pick an item from the costume/prop/mask pile and perform the story again. Class to discuss the difference the items made to the characters and performance (**CONTRAST**).

Skill Teaching & Practice (15mins)

Class reads the article: *12 years of injustice: How to help close Guantanamo Bay* (see Appendix). AGPs devise a piece to tell this story using costumes, props and masks.. Each student can only use one item of costume or prop or mask to extend and develop his or her character. A narrator and/or characters may read from the article during the performance.

(Idea: Phil Baker)

Sharing & Reflection (15mins)

AGPs perform/discuss their work in progress to class for peer assessment and positive criticism.

T: Must write reflections in notebooks NOW.

Homework

Write down as many ideas as you can: How can a dozen 1-metre length bamboo sticks be used in a performance by actors to develop their character or be used to create a place/situation.

Lessons 12-13. EPIC THEATRE Group Devise practice run

Teaching Resources

Audio equipment, cables, laptop, internet access, butcher's paper, outliner pens.

Context

This double period gives students the opportunity to work in their groups to devise a short piece using the techniques they have been learning. Students listen to music stimulus and create a piece using simple, symbolic costume and one prop. Students perform pieces in Lesson 14. This is an opportunity to practice working together in a group-devised project.

Targeted Outcomes

5.1.1, 5.1.2, 5.1.3, 5.1.4, 5.2.2, 5.2.3, 5.3.1, 5.3.2, 5.3.3

Lesson Sequence

Roll call and Warm-up (10mins)

Concentration (10mins)

Group devised performance ideas discussed.

T: Injustice topic must be chosen by start of next week.

Stimulus: Students listen to the song *Famine and the Death of A Mother* by Lowercase Noises....

<http://music.lowercasenoises.com/album/this-is-for-our-sins>

Students discuss the images the music inspires in them and possible themes that could be explored and performed around the theme of injustice.

Skill Teaching & Practice (60mins)

Students are put into their Assessment Task Groups (AGPs) and must playbuild, devise and perform an **Injustice** piece inspired by the music *Famine and the Death of A Mother (MOOD)*. If students do not have any plausible ideas/themes to work with, the teacher provides the following scenario for them...

1. A family farming the harsh land occupied by a rebel army.
2. Birth of a child and a mother's love.
3. Child becomes a man/forced to join army.
4. Death of the mother due to famine.
5. The soldier returns home.

Skill Teaching & Practice (60mins)

Students are put into their Assessment Task Groups (AGPs) and must playbuild, devise and perform an *Injustice* piece inspired by the music *Famine and the Death of A Mother (MOOD)*. If students do not have any plausible ideas/themes to work with, the teacher provides the following scenario for them...

1. A family farming the harsh land occupied by a rebel army.
2. Birth of a child and a mother's love.
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Their performance piece must have 5 scene changes – approximately one per minute. Students must use Epic Theatre and dramatic techniques they have been taught in this unit. This includes gestus, character movement and voice, ensemble movement, breaking the fourth wall, alienation technique, poetry, song, narration, placards, mime, tableaux and

Appendix

12 years of injustice: How to help close Guantanamo Bay

By Steffanie Pinch. January 13, 2014.

January 11 marked the 12th unacceptable anniversary of Guantanamo Bay. It was originally billed as a military prison under the Bush administration for supposed "dangerous" prisoners who would be interrogated and prosecuted with war crimes.

In actuality, Gitmo (as the prison is now known) has been a corrupt holding centre for more than 700 detainees, a death sentence for nine prisoners, a national money pit and a facility for torture of all kinds. The detainees held at Gitmo have been kept without trials, without charges and without justice for far too long. Detainees have been active in their own resistance by staging hunger strikes. However, the mainstream media has failed to keep the public informed about this continuous struggle, even as more than 100 detainees refused to eat in early 2013.

Activists have been organizing against to close Gitmo for over a decade. On Saturday, activists from around the world spoke out on the Day of Action to End Guantanamo Bay. Through direct actions, petitions and media consciousness raising, activists have helped put pressure on politicians to release detainees.

In 2008, Barack Obama famously said he would close Gitmo. Since opening, the amount of detainees has slowly decreased. Currently there are still 155 people imprisoned at Gitmo -- 77 of them are cleared for release. Most recently a Yemeni man, imprisoned since Gitmo was opened, has been cleared for release, without any charges ever being laid. Success is still far from reach. Even though the day of action is over, there is still more that we can do to help make Guantanamo Bay history:

References

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