

Theatre as an Exemption to the Economic Base

Authored by Marissa Gell

Drama and Sociology

Despite living in a capitalist society, theatre still is able to maintain a level of autonomy in the creation of its work. In the essay, I explore how Marx's idea of base and superstructure, being the social framework of society, although relevant when examining the socio-political structures of our society does not allow for a deep understanding of theatre and capitalism. This is relevant in how some aspects of Marx's superstructure are able to seem untouched by the economic mode of production. Despite theatre's reflection in different aspects of its production, it has been able to separate itself from the economic base by creating an art form that does not necessarily fit into Marx's idea of a commodity. Thus, not allowing for traditional labour relations and commodity fetishism that results. Althusser's understanding, on the other hand, allows for a more autonomous structure, where theatre both reflects the economic base but also critiques it. I use the example of *Hamilton* the musical to exemplify how features of this economic base can be present in a theatrical production. I also examine a local Edmonton retelling of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* by Colleen Murphy called *The Society for the Destitute Presents: Titus Bouffonius* which uses techniques found in Brechtian style theatre. It is through these techniques that this theatre performance has been able to skirt the totality of economic production and provide a critique of the ideology present in society.

Keywords: *capitalism, commodification, Karl Marx, Louis Althusser, superstructure, theatre*

Introduction

In 2015 *Hamilton* the musical, which tells the story of the United States Founding Fathers, was premiered Off-Broadway at the Public Theatre in New York City. Years later the show has now accumulated millions of dollars, awards and success. With "Hamilton's" recent deal with Disney plus, one may question if theatre and art are simply destined to be a reflection of the capitalist system in which it was produced. I explore how the ideas of Karl Marx and Louis Althusser are present or not in the production of theatre, and furthermore, how their ideas of ideology, commodification and class consciousness are a feature of how theatre is produced, documented and viewed. Lastly, I examine how theatrical styles introduced by Brecht can be used to create a politically inflected theatre.

Theatre within Capitalism

Karl Marx, a German philosopher and critic of capitalism, had theorized the way in which society is organized, is based on the modes of production. Marx explains this through the ideas of base and superstructure, with the base being the societies mode of production and the superstructure being the political, social, religious, artistic, morals, scientific and other cultural productions (Auslander 17). It is the base (the economic mode of production) which informs all other aspects of society. There is a direct relationship and reflection between these two. Thus, in the terms of theatre and theatrical production, Marx would understand the creation of theatre to mimic the modes of productions present in the given society. When interrogating a theatrical production, it can be easy to see the capitalist modes of production prominently foregrounded (through the cultural organization and labour roles i.e., production manager). As Beech states in his book *Art and Value* “Art has often adopted (capitalisms) latest forms of management marketing and values, not to mention the visual styles and advertising, popular culture and administration” (1). He then continues by stating that although there appears to be a “cozy relationship” between art and capitalism, there is in fact a difference between the incorporation of capitalist culture, social and political versus its economic incorporation (1). This is due in part to the nature of performance not aligning with the classical features of a commodity, which will be touched upon later. The relationship theatre has to the capitalist system would align more closely with Althusserian’s understanding of the base and superstructure relationship. Where Marx understands the base as the determiner of the superstructure, Althusser depicts a more autonomous relationship, however, still acknowledging the ultimate determining factor as the mode of production/economic make up (Auslander 24).

It can be argued that a theatrical production's incorporation of capitalist elements is thus subsumed by the system in itself; it is a capitalist production in and of itself. However, as discussed, the end result of the production is the performance, which does not fit the same standards and value

a commodity holds, nor does the relations which are entered reflect the industrialized production process. In *Theory for Performance Studies*, Philip Auslander defines the Marxist characterization of capitalism as “an unjust system of labour and production, centers on social relations and the tools used in the production of goods” (16). The system is unjust because the labourer is paid in the form of a wage that is “less than the total value a worker confers to the final product” (Boyle). Theatre is able to avoid this by predominantly working on a contract basis, which is “freely and directly agreed upon by a capitalist and a worker” (Boyle). This does not necessarily mean that the artists are not exploited; rather that a theatrical production does not prescribe to the capitalist form of production relations where a labourer sells their time in exchange for a wage as described by Marx. And thus, the labourer (in this case, the actor, director, set designer, etc) does not become alienated from their labour/work.

Theatre as a Commodity

The alienation of the worker results in two ways; firstly, through production in which the worker does not directly benefit from their personal labour rather the capitalist which employs them; and secondly, when workers become commodities themselves they must sell their “alienated labour” just like a good to the capitalist (Auslander 17). Marx calls this commodity fetishism, for which he explains as a mystification we have with the goods we produce and the labour we use to do so, which is shown in his book *Capital*:

“A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. This is the reason why the products of labour become

commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses” (47).

Marx understands that commodity fetishism arises because the capitalist society places inherent value in the commodities of labour. The qualities of a commodity are perceptible, meaning one can see for example a chair/object, but imperceptible in that we perceive the chair/object as inherent in value rather than the labour which was used to create it. This idea of commodities and value latent objects is difficult to transition into a theatrical production, as the given nature of live theatrical performance cannot be used for surplus value or exchange value in the traditional sense. For the production of theatre to become profitable in the capitalist sense, it would need to be “organized as wage labour for the purposes of creating commodities that yield surplus value” (Boyle).

Although theatre in its traditional form does not hold any surplus value or pose as a true commodity, in the Marxist sense it does not mean it is exempted from the capitalist system. With the development and advancements of filming technologies, documenting theatrical performances has allowed audiences around the world to experience a version of a theatrical production from their own home. It is through the process of documentation in which theatre is transformed from a non-conforming commodity into a true commodity. Let us examine Lin Manuel Miranda's award winning musical and Broadway success story, *Hamilton*. On June 21st, 2020, Lin Manuel Miranda tweeted “may you always be satisfied” with an attached trailer of the original Hamilton cast. The video ends with the original *Hamilton* poster and the words “streaming exclusively July 3rd (on Disney Plus).” *Hamilton* officially made it to the “big screen” of your home television, accessible through your Disney Plus account at the cost of \$8.99 per month (in Canada). It cost Disney \$75 million for the worldwide rights to the show. What occurred through this deal, is the commodification of the performance. Disney’s acquisition of the rights allows them to then sell the performance to other buyers. Using the theory of exchange value, this documented version of

Hamilton now acts in accordance with Marx's understanding of a commodity. The process of documenting live theatre has allowed for the commodification of its own value.

Theatre and Class Consciousness

Despite the risk Lin Manuel Miranda took by creating *Hamilton*, it is unsurprising that it surmounted its level of success. The combination of catchy music, high caliber of performers and an easily digestible story line made it an accessible piece of entertainment and theatre. However, in creating a digestible and accessible storyline about the founding fathers of the United States of America, Miranda conveniently leaves out entire chapters in American History, and in particular, the involvement of the founding fathers in the American Slave Trade. In her essay *Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda's Hamilton*, Lyra D. Monteiro uses the term "founder chic" to describe a recurring trend within "popular history writing" to valorize the founding fathers and reproduce a form of history which gives the impression the only people who mattered during these periods were "wealthy (often slave owning) white men (89). In theatre such as this, where entertainment is held to a high degree over truth, the viewing experience becomes a part of what Marx describes as "class consciousness". Marx explains the idea of class consciousness in his essay *German Ideology*, in which he describes how the idea of base and superstructure are the formations to class consciousness.

"The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct afflux from their material behaviour. The same applies to material production as expressed in the language of the politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics of people" (9).

For Marx, ideas/consciousness results in “material activity”, with this being the economic base. It is then the ruling class that instead controls the intellectual ideas, as they have the means of production and the abilities to create written doctrine. The viewing experience of *Hamilton* is a reflection of the class consciousness. However, this is not to paint all theatre and performance as a direct result of the ruling classes consciousness - it is instead the contrary. Theatre’s ability to step in between the lines of capitalist production allows it to take a critical lens at the dominant capitalist culture.

The idea of a reproduction of a capitalist society through class consciousness is shared with Althusser. Althusser expands on this notion explaining reproduction occurs on two levels through the coercion of force in the Repressive State Apparatuses and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) (Auslander 35). The Ideological State Apparatuses are the cultural, social and political institutions which work together to reproduce a capitalist discourse or ideology (Auslander 35). The idea of ideology for Althusser is viewed as “a narrative or story we tell ourselves in order to understand our relationship to modes of production. A real, objective world is not accessible to us, only representations of it” (Auslander pg 35). For Althusser, viewing a play is an extension of the “spectators consciousness”. In his essay, *The “piccolo Teatro”: Bertoluzzi and Brecht, Notes on a Materialist Theatre* Althusser states:

“The play itself is the spectators consciousness - for the essential reason that the spectator has no other consciousness than the content which unites him to the play in advance, and the development of this content in the play itself.” (Althusser).

The play for the spectator is an extension of their consciousness. What the play does, is further the ideological notions. If theatre is understood as a representation of the familiar, it is a representation of society's consciousness. As Althusser states “what is the ideology of a society or a period if it is not that society or periods consciousness of itself” (Althusser).

Althusser found the classical theatre which gave us tragedy as an exemplifier of the capitalist reproduction system through ideology. He argues that ideology is represented in the “consciousness of the central character (Althusser), and in classical theatre for which is uncritical of itself, its themes such as politics, morality, religion, honour, etc, are reproduced in alignment with the ideological thought of the time. However, theatre is not necessarily a reproducer of ideological thought. It is when a theatrical production chooses to ignore the classical aesthetic (the unities) in which theatre becomes a critique of the ideology. This idea is presented by the theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht, who has been known as the creator of a political theatre to do so.

Bertolt Brecht and the Alienation Effect

Bertolt Brecht, was born in 1898 in Augsburg Germany. He has become known for his style of “epic theatre” or political theatre, which actively attempted to remove the illusion of theatre and create a politically charged performance that required the audience to think critically of the subject matter present. Brecht created a plan for a drama that would use political and social issues as a form of public discourse (Styan 128). This idea of a political theatre found its emergence in theories from Karl Marx, who explained that theatre was explicit in the support of capitalism, as it shielded and distracted society from true problems, like class struggle (Chemers 4). Therefore, the main purpose of this type of theatre was not to entertain, but rather to teach. Brecht wanted the audience to leave with thoughts in their heads. Brecht accomplishes this through the introduction of the “Alienation Effect”, in which Brecht would use theatrical devices to separate the audience from the spectacle of performance. Brecht would reject performances such as *Hamilton* in which the drama emphasized plot, feeling, linear development, growth, and “thought to determine being”, in favour for his Epic theatre which emphasized disjointed narrative, reasoning, development through curve, montage and “social being determining thought” (Brecht 37).

Althusser found Brecht's theatrical techniques to be successful in dismantling ideological thought. For Althusser, if Brecht's plays were to “destroy the intangible image” of ideology, then the play is really the development of a new spectator consciousness (Althusser). This is accomplished through Brecht's alienation technique, or as understood by Althusser in relation to Brecht renouncing “the thematization of the meaning and implications of a play in the form of a consciousness of self” (Althusser). This implies Althusser means to favour a “new, true and active consciousness in his spectators”.

Theatre has the possibility to both reflect and critique capitalist ideology. As we have discussed, Althusser provides a relative degree of autonomy to the superstructure. What this means for theatrical productions, is that the social relations that go into making theatre can reflect capitalist modes of production, and the material itself doesn't necessarily need to reflect the capitalist ideology. Our examination of the Broadway Musical *Hamilton*, paints a bleak picture if the goal was to critique ideological ideas. However, this isn't the inherent goal of theatre. Theatre begins to become politically active when it starts to utilize techniques favoured by Althusser and created by Brecht. For example, the adapted play *The Society for the Destitute Presents: Titus Bouffonius*” by Colleen Murphy features a dual storyline of a company of clowns as they embark on the presentation of Shakespeare's play *Titus Andronicus*, known to be one of Shakespeare most bloody plays. This rewritten version did not follow along the traditional features of classical theatre. It often broke the 4th wall, had actors speaking their lines as their lines as their clowns not as the Shakespeare character, and featured a disjointed narrative as the Clowns often broke up the story to inform the audience of a manner the Clowns thought of as important. The play featured many elements of Brecht’s alienation technique, allowing for the audience to understand themes of revenge, family, sexual violence, and morality in a modern time. For instance, during the reveal of the brutality enacted on the character Lavina (who had her hands and tongue cut off after being raped by Tamora's sons),

the Clowns broke Shakespeare's character to ask the audience if they witnessed this, and begged the audience to call 911. To which, following in the roles of theatre, no audience member responded. This interaction "alienated" the audience. It forced them to think critically of our cultural norms which perpetrate and allow for rape and sexual violence to occur on the most vulnerable members.

Conclusion

Theatre has the unique ability to create in a capitalist world while still maintaining autonomy in its production. When examining the production structure of a theatrical performance or art in general one must take into account the social relations at play. Asking how has the economic base influenced a given production? Theatre and art in general will forever be in a battle with the capitalist system due to art's critical nature. However, it more so reflects Althusser's base and superstructure relationship in which there is a level of autonomy present. *Hamilton* and *The Society for the Destitute Presents: Titus Bouffonius*, provide us with a unique perspective in the theatre production, one of which has been informed, at least narratively, by the social consciousness of the upper class. Incorporating alienation techniques, as depicted by Brecht's, has opened a new form of capitalist critique within the performing arts. Using Brecht's theatre practices such as the alienation effect allows for a politically inflected theatre today.

Works Cited

- Althusser, Louis. "Part Four: The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht." *Notes on Materialist Theatre*, 1962, www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1962/materialist-theatre.htm.
- Auslander, Philip. *Theory for Performance Studies: A Student's Guide*. Routledge, 2008.
- Beech, Dave. "Introduction." *Art and Value: Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics*, Haymarket Books, 2016, pp. 1–30.
- Boyle, Michael Shane. "Performance and Value: The Work of Theatre in Karl Marx's Critique of Political Economy." *Theatre Survey*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2017, pp. 3–23.
- Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Edited and Translated by John Willett, Hill and Wang, 1964. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0040557416000661>.
- Chemers, Michael M. *A Concise Introduction to: Epic Theatre, Digital theatre*. DT+Fundamentals, University of California, Santa Cruz.
- Monteiro, Lyra D. "Review Essay: Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*." *The Public Historian*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2016, pp. 89–98. <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2016.38.1.89>.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1867, www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf.
- Marx, Karl. *The Critique of German Ideology*. Progress Publishers, 1932, www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_The_German_Ideology.pdfhttp://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_The_German_Ideology.pdf
- Styan, J.L. *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice: Expressionism and Epic Theatre, Vol. 3*. Cambridge University Press, 1981.