**Devices using the 'v' effect**

A theatrical **device** is a method or technique used onstage which has an aim or purpose. The aim when using the 'v' effect is to ensure that the audience are constantly reminded that they’re watching a piece of theatre.

**Narration**

Narration is used to remind the audience that what they’re watching is a presentation of a story. Sometimes the narrator will tell us what happens in the story before it has happened. This is a good way of making sure that we don’t become emotionally involved in the action to come as we already know the outcome.

**Coming out of role / third person narration**

Commenting upon a character as an actor is a clear way of reminding the audience of theatricality. For example, midway through a heightened scene the action might break for the actor to comment upon their character in the third person, ‘Darius felt his anger rise. He wasn’t being listened to and wanted revenge’, before returning to the scene.

**Direct address**

Speaking directly to the audience breaks the fourth wall and destroys any illusion of reality. An example would be the moment where Grusha pleads to save baby Michael in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* by Brecht:I brought him up, shall I also tear him to bits? I can’t.

**Using placards**

A **placard** is a sign or additional piece of written information presented onstage. Using placards might be as simple as holding up a card or banner. Multimedia or a PowerPoint slideshow can also be used for this effect. The musical, *Miss Saigon*, for example, used a slideshow to demonstrate the loss of lives in the Vietnam War which was highly effective. What’s important is that the information doesn’t just comment upon the action but deepens our understanding of it.

For example, a married couple are arguing and the wife is very upset. If the actress held up a placard saying ‘I’m miserable’ that wouldn’t tell us anything about the character that we didn’t already know. However, if her placard said ‘I’m having an affair’ or ‘I’ve never loved him’ the audience would be forced to consider other aspects of their relationship and to think about deeper reasons behind her tears.

# Brechtian staging

# Multi-roling

Multi-roling is when an actor plays more than one character onstage. The differences in character are marked by changing voice, movement, gesture and body language but the audience can clearly see that the same actor has taken on more than one role. This means the audience are more aware of the fact that they are watching a presentation of events. Cross-sex casting is also possible in Epic theatre as we don’t need to suspend our disbelief.

# Split-role

This is where more than one actor plays the same character. For instance, the actor playing the main character might rotate from scene to scene. This keeps that character representational and inhibits emotional involvement and attachment on the part of the audience.

# Minimal set / costume / props

Set, costume and props are all kept simple and representational. Elaborate costumes might mean that the sense of theatre, of pretending to be something else, was lost.

Brecht did believe in [**historicism**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/guides/zwmvd2p/revision/5#glossary-z6twhyc) as a convention ofverfremdungseffekt. Although mise-en-scène or the stage setting was minimal, there was always a sense of authenticity to production elements apart from a little sound and lighting. For example, Mother Courage’s cart in the National Theatre production is stocked full with realistic props that Mother Courage would need for authenticity. The cart is the fifth member of the family according to Brecht so there are examples of props being as important as characters in his plays.

# Symbolic props

Often one item can be used in a variety of ways. A suitcase might become a desk, or a car door or a bomb.

# Lighting

Brecht believed in keeping lighting simple as he didn’t want the production values to overshadow the message of the work. He believed in using harsh white light as this illuminates the truth.However, many modern productions do use lighting effects. The important thing is that the audience still see the theatre, so often they will see production personnel, such as backstage crew, in action on the stage rather than hidden.

# Song and dance

This is a good way to ensure that the audience sees the theatre and are reminded of the fact they are watching a play. Often in Brechtian theatre the style of the music and the lyrics jar, they don’t seem to fit together in style. This distances the audience further.

It’s worth listening to the song ‘Mack the Knife’ from The Threepenny Opera by Brecht and Kurt Weil. Notice how the musical arrangement and melody are upbeat and joyous, yet the lyrics are sinister and dark. This is a very Brechtian approach. One of the most famous lines from this work would still appeal to a modern audience: Who is the bigger criminal: he who robs a bank or he who founds one?

# Spass

Spass literally translates as ‘fun’. Brecht wanted to make his audience think. He realised that while we are laughing we are also thinking. So much so that the playwright Eugène Ionesco called him a ‘postman’ because he was always delivering messages! However, Brechtian work isn’t boring and it’s definitely not always serious either. Even if the message itself is serious Brecht realised that comedy could be an excellent way of engaging the audience and forcing them to think about issues.

Spass was also an excellent way to break the tension. Brecht needed to break rising tension to stop the audience from following characters on their emotional journey. It might be used in the form of a comic song, [**slapstick**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/guides/zwmvd2p/revision/7#glossary-zthjpv4) or physical comedy or even a stand-up routine. It’s ‘silliness’ in effect but often makes strong social comment in the way it’s used in the treatment of a serious subject.

For example, a very serious work addressing suicide might break the action at a key moment in a character’s unhappiness to break into a[**parody**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/guides/zwmvd2p/revision/7#glossary-zhpqn39) of an American advert:

*Are you feeling low? Depressed? Think there’s no way out? Then you need new ‘End it All’...*

The poor taste of this would be shocking for an audience. But it actually highlights the pain of depression through contrast and black comedy. The audience will laugh and then question **why** they laughed.

# Gestus

Gestus, another Brechtian technique, is a clear character gesture or movement used by the actor that captures a moment or attitude rather than delving into emotion. So every gesture was important. Brecht and his actors studied photographs of the plays in rehearsal to ensure each moment worked effectively. Could the audience tell by the actor’s gestures alone what was happening in the scene?

Brecht didn’t want the actors to be the character onstage, only to show them as a type of person. For example, the boss who is corrupt and smoking a fat cigar as his workers starve is representative of every boss who profits through the exploitation of others. For this reason Brecht will often refer to his characters by archetypal names, such as ‘The Soldier’ or ‘The Girl’.

The interpretation will be built on the character’s social role and why they need to behave as they do, rather than looking inwardly at emotional motivation. So we judge the character and their situation, rather than just empathising with them.

Gestus is also gesture with social comment. For example, a soldier saluting as he marches across a stage is a gesture. But if he was saluting as he marched over a stage strewn with dead bodies, it would be Gestus as a social comment about the type of person he represents. Mother Courage’s silent scream in the face of her son’s dead body is strange. Therefore we think of why she must hide her feelings rather than losing ourselves in the emotion. We react as thinking human beings as Helene Weigel – Brecht’s wife and partner in work - puts it.