
UNIT 28 DRAMATIC TECHNIQUE IN *THE ECSTASY OF RITA JOE* AND THE BRECHTIAN ANGLE

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28.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall look at Ryga's dramatic technique as it emerges in *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. The famous German dramatist Bertolt Brecht's work has some influence on Ryga's technique. That influence will also be touched upon.

28.1 THE BROAD TECHNIQUE-RELATED THRUST OF THE PLAY AND RYGA'S ECLECTICISM

Ryga's play is quite short in that it has only two acts. In some ways the compactness of the play almost makes it a one-act play⁷. The two acts enact more or less similar concerns and problems. One problem is that of the breakdown or absence of proper communication. A number of words, expressions and sometimes songs get repeated often.

The predicament of Rita Joe is quite harrowing and most of what happens to her emanates from the city and from the ruling white majority. The effect is one of getting choked and constricted. Rita's soul cries for relief and for justice but hardly any attention is paid to her.

She is dying to get a proper heaving from the Magistrate but fails in that because he is deaf, blind and uncommunicative where she is concerned. He is incapable of understanding her plight. He has peculiar notions and spells them out awkwardly and in a way which helps no one and nothing. He mouths clichés and homilies but is a cruel and heartless person who insists on following the law to its last detail.

The starkness of the situation gets highlighted by the instructions Ryga gives about the staging. He works by sudden movement, by foregrounding and by startling contrasts. Desire plays a big role in the underlining of what Rita's and Jaimie's real needs (and problems) are. They want to marry and have children but the Natives' past record in the matter of having children has been dismal. Bringing in Eileen helps to highlight Rita's misery. Eileen never got proper work and the alternatives she found were terribly inadequate and unsatisfying.

Natives do not find right work. They are targeted and victimised. They are expected to have qualifications that are beyond their reach. A woman can lose a job if she resists being exploited (sexually and otherwise) by an employer.

Rita has her own dreams and nightmares. The Magistrate has his own ideas. Ryga ironically gives the following stage direction:

The Magistrate gropes for words to express a message that is very precious to him.

A little earlier, one exchange between Rita and Magistrate is significant. The Magistrate says to Rita 'Tell me about the child?' Rita says: 'What child?'. The Magistrate says: 'The little girl I once saw beside the road'. Rita reply is:

I don't know any girl Mister. When do I eat, why does an Indian wait even when he there first thing in the morning.

In this way we find that the Magistrate and Rita are at cross-purposes. The play is not so much interested in form as in the message.

Ryga's techniques shows a lot of 'eclecticism', which means drawing from a great variety of sources. Ryga did just that and European influence on his drama is quite marked. The major influence is of course that of German dramatist and theorist Bertolt Brecht but Ryga does draw from other sources as well especially from German 'Expressionist' drama. There is also a touch of 'Theatre of Cruelty' which was an idea floated largely by the French dramatist and theorist Antonin Artaud. Ryga uses the stage imaginatively. His dramatisation often portrays the phantasmagoric within the characters' minds. On the whole his play emanates a crude power

28.2 EXPRESSIONISM AND 'THEATRE OF CRUELTY'

In *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* Expressionism and the Theatre of Cruelty (both European developments) affect Ryga's technique substantially. Both believe in shocking the audience through violence, distortion and exaggeration. 'The Theatre of Cruelty' was coined by the Frenchman Antonin Artaud (1896-1948). It aimed to communicate with the audience at a primitive, subconscious level by means of gesture, movement, sound and symbols.

As for 'Expressionism', it was originally meant to define an artistic movement which flourished at the beginning of the 20th century in Europe especially in Germany. The exaggeration and distortion which this involved induced unease in the viewing public. When it comes to viewing expressionism as a theatrical move, its origins are to be found in the work of a number of German dramatists who wrote between 1907 and the early 1920s. Carl Hauptmann and Ernst Toller were the leading figures. Steinberg was one of the idols of the movement. Expressionist elements come from Ryga's ability to shock, startle and jolt people into awareness.

The nightmarish quality of Rita's experience, her feelings of entrapment and unaccountable guilt go back through Kafka to early Expressionist drama. The American dramatist Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* also comes to mind. Rita claims to have seen God in the sky. She is told to call the Air Force. Jaimie sees a TV commercial that show a knife 'cutting of good shoes like they were potatoes.'

'Theatre of Cruelty' as envisaged of by Artaud, involved exaggeration and being relentless in the presentation of extremes. *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* has in it that element also.

The Ecstasy of Rita Joe:
Drama

Another trend popular in the 1950s in Europe and Britain was 'Theatre of the Absurd'. Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter were main figures in it. To someone like Ryga what would not have appealed much about 'Theatre of Absurd' was its relatively apolitical stance and its (largely) seeing the world as being beyond reform. The absurdist 'angst' is quite metaphysical and existential. Ryga's orientation was different. He was an activist through his drama. In 1954 he was forced to resign his job as a radio producer in Edmonton on account of his public protest against the Rosenberg trial.

In matters of stagecraft, Ryga's technique is quite pathbreaking. He uses a circular ramp and varied lighting effects. Violence and rape are shown on stage. Songs are used repeatedly. The singer has a chorus-like function. She foretells Jaimie's fate. She talks about the harshness of its life.

Some of the stage directions read as follows:

A circular ramp beginning at floor level stage left and continuing downward below floor level at stage front, then rising and sweeping along stage back at two-foot elevation to disappear in the wings of stage left. This ramp dominates the stage by wrapping the central and forward playing area. A short approach ramp, meeting with the main ramp at stage right, expedites entrances from the wings of stage right. The MAGISTRATE's chair and representation of court desk are situated at stage right, enclosed within the sweep of the ramp. At the foot of the desk is a lip on stage right side.

The SINGER sits here, turned away from the focus of the play. Her songs and accompaniment appear almost accidental. She has all the reactions of a white liberal folklorist with a limited concern and understanding of an ethnic dilemma which she touches in the course of her research and work in compiling and writing folk songs. She serves too as an alter ego to RITA JOE.

No curtain is used during the play. At the opening, intermission and conclusion of the play, the curtain remains up. The onus for isolating scenes from the past and present in RITA JOE's life falls on highlight lighting.

Backstage, there is a mountain cyclorama. In front of the cyclorama there is a darker maze curtain to suggest gloom and confusion, and a cityscape.

x x x x x

A sudden crash of thunder and a lightning flash. The lights turn cold and blue. The three MURDERERS stand in silhouette on a riser behind them. EILEEN cringes in fear, afraid of the storm, aware of the presence of the MURDERERS behind them. RITA JOE springs to her feet, her being attached to the wildness of the atmosphere. Lightning continues to flash and flicker.

x x x x x

A cold white light comes up on the playing area directly in front of the MAGISTRATE's chair. A MALE WITNESS of dishevelled, dirty appearance steps into the light and delivers testimony in a

whining, defensive voice. He is one of the MURDERERS, but apart from the other three, he is nervous.

x x x x x

Some YOUNG INDIAN MEN run onto the stage along the ramp and join JAIMIE PAUL and RITA JOE in their dance. The MURDERERS enter and elbow into the group, their attention specifically menacing towards JAIMIE PAUL and RITA JOE. A street brawl begins as a POLICEMAN passes through on his beat. THE MURDERERS leave hastily.

x x x x x

She shakes her head to indicate no, she is staying. Suddenly JAIMIE PAUL runs away from her diagonally across to the wings of rear stage left. As he nears the wings, the four YOUNG INDIAN MEN emerge, happily on their way to a party. They stop him at his approach. He runs into them, directing them back, his voice breaking with feelings of love and hatred intermingling.

x x x x x

With deceptive casualness, the MURDERERS approach him. One of them makes a sudden lurch at JAIMIE PAUL as if to draw him into their circle. JAIMIE PAUL anticipates the trap and takes a flying kick at the MURDERER, knocking him down.

They close around JAIMIE PAUL with precision, they attack. JAIMIE PAUL leaps, but is caught midair by the other two. They bring him down and put the boots to him. RITA JOE screams and runs to him. The train sound is loud and immediate now.

One of the MURDERERS has grabbed RITA JOE. The remaining two raise JAIMIE PAUL to his feet and one knees him viciously in the groin. JAIMIE PAUL screams and doubles over. The lights of the train are upon them. The MURDERERS leap off the ramp leaving JAIMIE PAUL in the path of the approaching train. JAIMIE PAUL's death cry becomes the sound of the train horn. As the train sound roars by, the MURDERERS return to close in around RITA JOE. One MURDERER springs forward and grabs RITA JOE. The other two help to hold her, with nervous fear and lust. RITA JOE breaks free of them and runs to the front of the stage. The three MURDERERS come after her, panting hard. They close in on her leisurely now, playing with her, knowing that they have her trapped.

A number of British dramatists of 1950s and 1960s like Arnold Wesker and John Arden made use of Expressionistic techniques and were influenced by Brecht in their use of a singer. Plays like *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* have a special openness about their form as opposed to the constricted breathing space of a typical absurd play by Beckett. At the same time Pinter was the one who gave us 'Comedies of Menace'. Such menace is there in Ryga too but he is influenced by virtually everybody. The trial of Rita has a bit (only a bit) in it of the trial of Saint Joan. She and the Magistrate are always at cross-purposes.

The form of the play is that of a parable and it uses allegory to good effect.

28.3 WHO IS BRECHT?

To understand *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* better and to get a better grip on Ryga's dramatic orientation, the students need to know a little about the great German 20th Century dramatist and drama-theorist Bertolt Brecht.

Brecht (1898-1956) was born on February 10, 1898 in Angobury, Southern Germany. Two of his most famous plays are *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939) and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1945). His main theoretical treatise was *Little Organum for Theatre* published in 1949. Against the 'magic' and 'emotionalism' of the traditional theatre he puts clarity, simplicity and objectivity of a didactic stage.

In a sense the bleakness of the bare stage in *Mother Courage*, the distancing effects, liminal lighting and 'alienated' acting, were designed as 'a withdrawal course for emotional addicts' from the narcotic excesses of German theatre under the Third Reich.

28.4 BRECHTIAN DEPARTURES

Brecht as a theorist of drama is famous for his theorising about 'Epic Theatre'. In general 'Epic Theatre' was a movement in the German theatre of 1920s that asserted that the appeal of theatre should be to the intellect of the audience rather than to its emotion. Brecht was its main exponent.

Between conventional drama and Epic Theatre many differences are there. A list provided by Brecht himself is quite instructive:

Dramatic Forms of the Theatre

direct action
involves the audience in
 action on stage
uses up their activity
facilitates emotions
experience
the audience is projected into
 an action
hypnotic suggestion
the feelings are conserved

man is taken for granted
unchangeable man

suspense as to the outcome
one scene leads to another
linear development
evolutionary necessity
the world as it is

man as a fixed entity
thought determines existence
feeling

Epic Form of the Theatre

narrative
makes the audience into
 observes, but
awakens their activity
enforces decisions
image of the world
the audience is confronted with it

argument
are impelled to the point of
 recognition
man is the object of inquire
man as both the subject and object
 of change
suspense as to the process
each scene a separate unit
in a series of curves
leaps
the world in the process of
 development
man as a process
social existence determines thought
reason

28.5 THE EXTENT OF RYGA'S DEBT TO BRECHT

**Dramatic Technique in
The Ecstasy of Rita Joe:
The Brechtian Angle**

Brecht is an important influence on Ryga who was a Ukrainian. The important thing to remember is that Ryga is very eclectic and draws inspiration from a great variety of sources. There are Expressionist elements and there are Brechtian elements. He uses the stage imaginatively. His dramatic action often portrays the phantasmagoric within the character's mind. The play *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* exudes a crude power.

Brechtian influence is more or less direct in Ryga's use of songs, his didactic intent, his awareness of the element of alienation. 'Alienation' was very close to Brecht's heart. The performative aspect is strong. The structure is intensely rhythmic.

Brecht's influence is pervasive in *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* but it still remains only one of the main influences. The play is so eclectic that it draws its inspiration from a great variety of sources including German Expressionism.

Brecht's influence at the more visible level is in Ryga's incorporation of songs in his play. Here let us just note that the killing of Jaimie by an oncoming train is anticipated by the Singer who also talks about the city's harmful role in Native people's lives.

28.6 CONCLUSION

In conclusion one can say that Ryga is a very versatile dramatist, who values social concerns and vocally opposes injustices of various kinds. He was a Ukrainian himself. His sympathy for the natives come to quite forcefully in this play. The play is one of the most notable achievement of Canadian drama which otherwise has a thin body of work. Canadian drama does not compare very favourably with Canadian poetry and Canadian novel. Still in recent times Canadian drama had manage to carve out a place for itself in Canadian writing as a whole.

QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the main influences on Ryga's dramatic technique?
2. Which one has the upper hand in Ryga's drama? Is it form or content or is it the case that both work equally to produce a powerful statement?

SUGGESTED READING

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