

## “By this hand”: Brecht’s portrayal of a dystopian society through kinesics of the hand in ‘The Good Person of Szechwan’

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### Abstract

Theatre is poetry of the body. What one writes on the page as a play is born to life only when enacted on the stage. The movement of the limbs in a play, as in a dance performance, can make or break the efficacy of drama. No wonder plays that lack words can still have the capacity to convey to the audience the deepest of emotions.

The aim of this paper is to understand in detail the role of movement in the Bertolt Brecht’s ‘The Good Person of Szechwan’, and how the kinesics of the hands play the part of the analyst in various sections of the play – in stage directions as well as stage performances. With a reference to the language of the body, this paper would try to portray in detail an understanding of how Brecht employs movement as a tableau for his message in his play, ‘The Good Person of Szechwan.’

**Keywords:** *Hands, Theatre, Movement, Kinesics, God, Limbs, Shen Teh, Shui Ta*

When Shen Teh leads a child by the hand<sup>1</sup>, hoping for a better world for her young pilot to fly into, the dialectical spectator might wonder if it foreshadows a morning into a better world, led by “The Good Person of Szechwan”. What one does not anticipate is the immediate withdrawal of that hope when Shen Teh raises – almost as a tableau, the child of the carpenter scavenging for food. Shen Teh, through the action of her hands, represents both hope, and a farce of hope. It is impossible to overstate Brecht’s theoretical influence on 20th-century theatre. His idea of “Epic Theatre” is a significant divergence from the foundational ideas of classical Aristotelian theatre. Epic



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<sup>1</sup> Brecht, Bertolt. (2016) 2016. The Good Person Of Szechwan. 1st ed. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Theatre breaks the illusion which is at the core of traditional theatre by combining narration with enactment. Brecht was not interested in spectatorship or plain enjoyment, even if he recognised that theatre had to be enjoyable for the audience. He compared illusionistic theatre to the consumption of opium, since both put the audience in a stupor, redundant to the dialectical audience<sup>2</sup>. Instead, he wanted to implore the audience to consider and act to effect social change. “Verfremdungseffekt”, sometimes known as the “alienation effect,” is the basic concept characterising Brechtian theatre. Verfremdungseffekt (V-effekt), usually translated as ‘Alienation Effect’ (a-effect), is a concept of the arts, distinguishing itself from either Hegelian or Marxist notions of alienation – Entfremdung – by being relentlessly focused on the theatre and its political, aesthetic and intellectual impact on roles, actors, and the audience.<sup>3</sup>

Returning to the Poetics of Aristotle and taking as an example ancient tragedies and comedies, he rejects the idea of catharsis. Brecht questions in ‘A Short Organum for the Theatre’, “What liberation is this, given that at the end of all these plays, which worked happily only because of the spirit of their time (providence - the moral order), we live a dream-like execution that punishes exaltation as much as debaucheries?” referring to the tragedies of Sophocles, and to the comedies and dramas of Shakespeare.<sup>4</sup>

Brecht illustrated his ideas to fundamentally alter how the audience participates in the theatrical experience in his “A Short Organum for the Theatre”. He emphasised that the audience should not be inclined to empathise with the characters in a play or live out their experience through them – “We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself”<sup>5</sup>. Contrarily, in order to be able to evaluate the deeds of fictitious characters by the greatest ethical standards, the audience must maintain an analytical and critical distance. The characters’ actions and decisions are judged by the spectators, who are also invited to consider

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<sup>2</sup> Brecht, Bertolt, 1898-1956 and John. Willett, *Brecht On Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic..* New York, Hill and Wang, 1964.

<sup>3</sup> Kolb, Martina. "Verfremdungseffekt." *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism.* : Taylor and Francis, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Brecht, Bertolt. 1949. "A Short Organum for the Theatre". *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic.* Ed. and trans. John Willett. London: Methuen, 1964.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 190.

potential plots and choices. No longer kept in suspense, the spectator does not feel sympathy or empathy for the characters in order to reach these rational conclusions, since according to Brecht, empathy tampers with the rationale. Actors may therefore forego their given roles and reveal their true selves, may also act as separate entities while projecting their roles. An actor in an Epic theatre recites Oedipus, while an actor in a classical theatre becomes Oedipus.

As a result, actors may leave their designated positions and inform the audience of what they are about to accomplish, or certain signs and titles may appear on stage and serve as helpful cues and guidance. The audience is compelled to confront the issues raised and take part in finding solutions because they are always conscious of the fact that they are at a theatre and witnessing a play performed by actors who are obviously not the same as their characters.

Bertolt Brecht's theatrics employ actions of the Body to emulate dynamics of the society. Wang's comic commentary on the people walking past him may serve the purpose of *Verfremdung*, yet the emphasis on "Bent shoulder" and "Inky fingers" is expressive of social irony. The movement of the hands provides a detailed study of the society and interpersonal relationships in "The Good Person of Szechwan". One identifying feature of the gods is the lack of any sign of labour, as labour is intended for the lowest rungs of the society. A sign of exhaustion, as shown by the "bent shoulders" leaves an implication that the gods would not be exposed to exhaustion initially, but the capacity of exhaustion is not totally impossible for them too. Later in the play, the gods progressively become more and more exhausted, wounded and frustrated. One of them has a limp, the other a blackened eye. This makes them more human, but unlike the way Longinus comments on Homer's gods. To Longinus, "As far as possible, Homer made the humans in the Iliad gods and the gods human" (On the Sublime 9.6-7)<sup>6</sup>. The gods are frivolous, laughing at Hephaestus' limp, whereas all his humans are godlike in stature, speech and actions. Aeschylus' gods are infallible, Sophocles' gods indifferent, Euripides' gods are personas of ambiguity, Homer's gods behave like humans; Brecht's gods are affected like humans. Comic as it may seem, this reverses the role and attributes of the divine as seen in classical dramaturgy. The gods, initially, like the richer strata of the society, are untouched by

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<sup>6</sup> Longinus, active 1st century. Dionysius Longinus on the Sublime Translated from the Greek, with Notes and Observations, and Some Account of the Life, Writings and Character of the Author. By William Smith,. London: printed by J. Watts: and sold by W. Innys and R. Manby, 1739.

labour. In the course of the play, they begin to look more and more like any other character of the play – injured like Wang, hopeless like Yang Sun, and in the end, they impersonate the bribed judiciary.

Wang offers water to the gods in a measure with a false bottom. He later admits to it, walking up to the gods, picking up his measure from the ground, adding that he is not a “good person”, atleast not the particular species of goodness the gods are looking for. Later in the play, when the gods come looking for Wang under the culvert, his sleeping place, Wang responds by raising his arms, not in supplication, but in an attempt to shield himself from the gods, “as if he would be struck”. It is intriguing to note that in the event of an actual fraud, that is, having a measure with a false bottom, Wang responds by simply admitting to his crime. In the second case, Wang fears that he had let the gods down, by being unable to provide a shelter for them. He is afraid of death, of being struck down because of a fault, which in hindsight, given the circumstances, is not a criminal offence. The misplaced judiciary finds a passing reference in this act of supplication. Neither is Wang bound to provide or arrange for a shelter for the gods, nor does he have the means. The contrast in the reactions between the well-off in the society and Wang with reference to lodging can be explained by the fact that Wang, knowing that he was not responsible for the gods’ plight, can still anticipate some form of capital punishment, while the rich in the society could get away with a worse crime of not providing shelter to the divine, despite possessing the means.

Light plays an important role in “The Good Person of Szechwan”. Shen Teh puts out the light in order to prepare the house for the gods, in turn losing a client. Later, she leads the gods into her house, guiding them with a lamp. Whether an audience of the staged play sees Butterworth or Rae’s “Lady of the Lamp” paintings of Florence Nightingale<sup>7</sup>, or visualises Edgar Allan Poe’s Helen with a lamp<sup>8</sup> in this depiction, either way Shen Teh stands for the ultimatum of goodness. Her kindness to the divine foreshadows her mercy to the mortal. The image of Shen

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7 Butterworth, J., active 1839-1854. ‘Florence Nightingale as the lady with the lamp’. Christopher Wright et al., *British and Irish paintings in public collections*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2006, p. 201.

8 Edgar Allan Poe, "To Helen (1831)," *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, Lit2Go Edition, (1903), accessed November 08, 2023, <https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/147/the-works-of-edgar-allan-poe/5299/to-helen-1831/>.

Teh, a prostitute, leading the gods with a guiding lamp may also remotely allude to the journey of the Magi. “The Angel of the Slums”, as Shen Teh later was called, constitutes a strange binary to the The Star of Bethlehem, or Christmas Star, that appears in the nativity story of the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter II, where “wise men from the East” (The Magi) are inspired by the star to travel to Jerusalem to greet and worship baby Jesus<sup>9</sup>. The Star of Christ, parallel to The Angel of the Slums, leads the Magi to their destiny, while Shen Teh leads the three travel-weary gods to their rest. The bringer of light, always symbolised as the epitome of goodness, is expected hence to be merciful, benevolent, almost naïvely divine, and Shen Teh fulfils all these roles, by distributing rice to the very hands that snatch away the pot from her (Mrs. Shin), by sheltering the ones who threw her on the streets, by the self-sacrificial tendencies that raise her to a figure akin to that of Christ. The Christian ethics of purity and chastity attributed to the body are dealt with by Brecht with no graphic, subtle or narrative descriptions of Shen Teh’s life as prostitute in the current scheme of the play. The audience or the reader only comes to know of her profession in retrospect. Shen Teh from the very start is the Angel, ‘pure’ both physically and by her goodness, if we take into account the scant definitions of goodness.

The breach occurs with the arrival of Shui Ta. Rather than being an alter-ego of Shen Teh, Shui Ta serves as a realistic counterpart to Shen Teh’s impossible humanity. Shui Ta’s first action in the tobacco shop is hence to put out the light. The action of putting out the light, although, is not symbolic of utter darkness. Sheh Teh arrives in the morning, masked as Shui Ta, and the juxtaposition of the morning light with the slight darkness caused by putting out the fire is foray into the rest of the play, that the absence of light is not abject blackness, but a necessary grey, that every Shen Teh needs a Shui Ta to survive in a capitalist society. The changing of costumes, which is later shown on stage in an interlude, is far from being an attempt to be realistic. Brecht emphasised on Realism rather, and the dichotomy in the action stands for the dilemma of the two personalities. Shen Teh lights a lamp to provide shelter to the gods, Shui Ta puts out the light and throws out the ones whom Shen Teh had sheltered. Shen Teh is miserable, and hence Shui Ta is the miser.

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<sup>9</sup> Gospel of Matthew (2:1 – 12), King James Version.

Brecht, intriguingly, shows poverty through actions of violence. Unlike Dickens' famous portrayal of "innocent poverty" in 'Oliver Twist', as observes Josephine Allen<sup>10</sup>, Brecht concentrates on the deficiencies of the society that unwittingly leads to delinquency for a class that needs to survive. Shen Teh's question, "How can they be blamed?" becomes a problematic issue when one takes into account every injustice meted out to her by people who are economically more disadvantaged than she is. Mrs. Shin's obstinacy in snatching away the pot in bitterness is her vengeance resulting from no fault of Shen Teh. Lin To, the carpenter's persistence for payment of the walnut shelves, his bitter retribution in taking away the shelves only to realise they would not fit anywhere else, and Shui Ta's final verdict of "Twenty silver dollars" is almost cruel, and yet in a way justified, given Shen Teh's plight. Yang Sun's wasted youth, his curtailed ambition resulting in his decision to end his life is a projection of the boy who is sent to steal bread from Shen Teh's tobacco shop. The hands that could have soared over "lands and seas" is forced to fling a rope across the branches of a tree to prepare a noose. There is a certain violence, a rupture of order in every action of Brecht's poverty. Brecht's poor is very different from the generic fable of poverty : of honesty, inherent goodness and simplicity being intrinsic to economic instability. Allen notes, "The vast discrepancy between the prosperity of the rich and the profound deprivation of the poor suggest that a structural perspective of violence may be particularly instructive of the fundamentality of this social difference".

Brecht was inspired by Buchner in his portrayal of the poor, through actions of violence. There are many themes that Buchner brings to light through his play 'Woyzeck', but perhaps the most dominant one is his depiction of the poor<sup>11</sup>. Buchner presented a character who was good, true to the terms of 'goodness' expected of Shen Teh, and only did what he had to do to survive, unlike Shui Ta, who was determined to find a better life, knowing well that Shen Teh would soon have a child. It was through the actions of those deemed 'better' than him, for their own selfishness and amusement that Woyzeck's demise came about. Were it not for his poverty in the

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10 Josephine A. V. Allen. PhD (2001) Poverty as a Form of Violence. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 4:2-3, 45-59, DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1300/J137v04n02\\_03](https://doi.org/10.1300/J137v04n02_03).

11 Richards, David G. (2001). *Georg Büchner's Woyzeck: A History of Its Criticism*. Rochester, NY: Camden House.

first place he would not have had to take part in the Doctor's experiment, leading to his deteriorated state of mind. Were it not for his hallucinations he may have perhaps dealt with the betrayal of Marie differently. Buchner deals with determination degenerating to dystopia with the climax of Woyzeck stabbing his wife to death, while Brecht's dystopian poverty still has some silver lining attached to it, in the fact that the play ends unanswered, and unanswered rhetorics have the potential to be affirmative.

While the poor are redeemed with the fact that they have no choice, Brecht shows the inefficiency of the people in power as protectors, or even as good human beings. The policeman affirms that Shen Teh's profession was "not a profession of respect", as love bought with money was unchaste; he later writes out an advertisement for marriage, justifying it with "That's right, we marry a bit of money". This is not just the hypocrisy of the upper class, but the society as a whole. With a strong regard for law and order, the policeman is a friend of the upper classes of the society. Shu Fu, the barber, hits Wang on his hands with hot curling tongs, rendering one hand useless. Yang, finally on the verge of becoming a pilot, uses his 'hand-in-her-blouse' card when he sees his dreams almost on the verge of being shattered, breaking down whatever tenderness might have been there between him and Shen Teh. The coarseness, cruelty, and corruption prevalent in the upper classes or the supposed protectors of the society stand in an essential binary against the selfishness in the utter lack of choice among the poor. While shuffling the wine jug in the face of definite knowledge that the shelter of the tobacco shop would not be there for the people the next day, they sing the Song of Smoke. They make merry, knowing of definite calamity. Joy Goswami's poem, "Noon" (trans. 'Salt') talks about a similar theme, where the narrator of the poem indulges in buying a rose shrub, and later suffers the consequences of not buying salt, a bare minimum of a livelihood that he no longer has the money to buy with. Through indulgence in the state of dire poverty, Brecht pits the Dionysiac poor against the facade of the Apollonian rich, where the false ideals of righteousness, law and order are farcical in the context of a Capitalist society. No wonder that Wang rushes to the magistrate to avail a sum of compensation from the barber than visit the doctor for his hand in the society of Brecht's Szechwan.

In mimetic presentations of Nativity, the shepherds and townsmen of Bethlehem refuse to shelter Joseph and Mary before the birth of Christ by waving their hands. Likewise, no

townsmen of the upper class shelter the gods of Szechwan, “Who knows what sort of gods they are?” Whether in the Bible or in Szechwan, the owners of houses refuse shelter to divinity. The symbolic waving of the hand by raising it and moving it to either side is a gesture in greeting or farewell. The gods wave their hands to Shen Teh twice in the play, both in farewell. The first time they wave their hands is when they offer Shen Teh a thousand silver dollars to find a better life, and “hastily disappear”. When Shen Teh’s life as a tobacconist begins, the element of *Deus ex machina* ends in the play. The casting of a single vote by Athena in the favour of Orestes changes his fate, while throughout the “*Eumenides*”, his fate is intervened by Apollo<sup>12</sup>. The Delphic Prophecy that narrated Oedipus’ life is a veritable phantom presence throughout Sophocles’ “*Oedipus Rex*”<sup>13</sup>. Ambiguous as it may seem, the chariot of Helios taking Medea away after her heinous crimes is Euripides’ deliverance against the injustice meted out to her. In classical plays of Greek antiquity, the role of the Gods was unparalleled. Brecht, upturning the Aristotelean theatre, reduces the role of the gods into a ridicule. The travel-weary gods have a black eye. One walks with a limp. They come down to the earth no one welcomes them, they leave flying away on pink clouds, unlike Homer’s Apollo “who shines like the light and descends like the night”<sup>14</sup>. There is reverence for the terrifying nature of the Divine; in Brecht, the only ones who recognise the divine with due respect is Wang and Shen Teh, until even Wang says that it is indeed very difficult “to be good in this society”. Ironically, the “*Illustrious Ones*” illustrate no way on how to lead a better life. It is a sharp contrast to the classical ideals of leading a good life, where there were one hundred and forty seven Delphic Maxims instructive on being a better person, Brecht’s gods offer only one “Above all, be good Shen Teh”. What is goodness, after all? The gods provide no answer. Their waving a goodbye is akin to a refusal of responsibilities, their narrow ideas of goodness restricted to the fact that if there is even one good person, irrespective of their social class in this wreckage of an economy, the axioms of religion would not be dated. It is incomprehensible to them that a text-book good person in a capitalist

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12 Aeschylus. *The Oresteia of Aeschylus*. New York :Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1978.

13 Sophocles. *Three Theban Plays : Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*. Translated by Robert Fagles. Penguin Classics. 1984.

14 *The Iliad of Homer*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951. T: (Lattimore 1951, 91–92) R: Lattimore, Richmond, trans. 1951.



society is either surprisingly well at hiding a different, more realistic identity, as is Shen Teh, or simply a dead good person.

Michelangelo was inspired by the Genesis phrase “God created man in his own image” by drawing two similar bodies, both strong and robust, in the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in 1511<sup>15</sup>. On the left side is Adam lying on the ground, and seems to be waking up, while God on the right side comes from Heaven surrounded by angels. The main detail of the fresco is represented by the fingers of God and Adam almost touching each other. One interpretation is that the Creator’s index finger pointed authoritatively at the man seems to be ready to give an impulse to Adam’s hand, which instead seems as weak as if it were ready to receive energy from the Lord. Scholars believed that Michelangelo was inspired by the medieval hymn “Veni Creator Spiritus”<sup>16</sup>. This particular hymn mentions the finger of the paternal right hand. With the fingers of God and Adam, Michelangelo decided to symbolise it as the “divine breath of life,” almost touching each other. This well-known gesticulation represents the creation of the first man on earth.

When the gods of Szechwan are overwhelmed to find Shen Teh alive, their concern over the existence of a good person is satisfied. Happily they leave, mounting their heavenly clouds, waving to Shen Teh, who in turn, desperately reaches out to the gods, hands and fingers stretched towards them. One might see a preposterous reenactment of the hands in Michelangelo’s ‘The Creation of Adam’ through the kinesics of the gods and Shen Teh’s hands. The index finger of God in Michelangelo’s painting stands for command, benevolence, and the Divine will to reach out to man for his salvation, for the attainment of heaven. Adam’s fingers, however, appear to show his confounded state of mind. His index finger which almost touches God’s is bent downwards, hence moving away from the outstretched finger of God. This downward finger of man is the representation of Free Will. Through Free Will, man is able to decide his own fate, as the finger of Michelangelo’s God is always outstretched in hopes of

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15 Sistine Chapel, “The Creation of Man by Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel Ceiling,” Accessed on 8 November, 2023, <https://www.thesistinechapel.org/sistine-chapel> .

16 "Veni Creator Spiritus" (Come, Creator Spirit) is a traditional Christian hymn believed to have been written by Rabanus Maurus, a ninth-century German monk, teacher, archbishop, and saint. Source : Quitslund, Beth. *The Reformation in Rhyme: Sternhold, Hopkins and the English Metrical Psalter* (Ashgate, 2008), pp. 204, 229.

aiding his children attain salvation. This in turn goes back to the Aristotelian axiom that Character is fate. Man decides, through his own free will, whether to be saved or damned.

The final wave of goodbye is hence painfully ludicrous. Shen Teh's fingers, in stage presentation of the play, would always be outstretched towards the gods, pleading for their help. The gods however, while waving, would not be stretching out their fingers, their hands once again refusing the responsibilities of the world they created.

The symbolism of the hand in literature is rich and varied. According to Gertrude Jobes<sup>17</sup>, the hand represents authority, benediction, amity, construction, divine grace, divine presence, oath, pledge, usefulness, faith, vigour, and work. The fingers, the thumb, and the palm all have their individual symbolism. Hands made of gold, studded with jewels, or of glass or base metals, have been revered as talismans against evil influences. Cirilot writes, "two hands joined signifies mystic marriage – the Jungian individuation" and "In Jung's opinion, the hand is endowed with a generative significance". In alchemical images, the king's left hand grasping the queen's left hand "may refer to the unconscious character of their union but that it may also be indicative either of affection or superstition".

Hands, the anatomy of labour, are used as mediums of social commentary by Brecht. On one hand, he shows the inefficiency of the Capitalist Society, and on the other hand, he portrays the utter uselessness of Religion as a force of justice or redemption in the community. No wonder Shen Teh stands with the carpenter's bill and paperwork of rent on either hands, a reminder of helplessness, of why Shui Ta is at all needed. The absence of a resolution drives the plot of the play, and ends in rhetoric. A man thwarted in the attainment of food would not appease with the Divine if the divine does not appease with his starvation.

"He can fly and he can kill.  
But he has one defect:  
He can think."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Jobes, Gertrude. Dictionary of mythology, folklore and symbols / by Gertrude Jobes. 1962.

<sup>18</sup> Brecht, Bertolt. General, Your Tank Is a Powerful Vehicle. Later Svendborg Poems and Satires. (1936-1938)

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