

Sample Rehearsal Schedule for a Full-Length Brechtian Production

Introduction

Here you will find a sample rehearsal schedule for what I have called a full-length Brechtian production, and the scheme is based on my experiences of directing the plays *Closer* by Patrick Marber and *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller. By 'full-length' I mean a production with a running time of about 2-2 ½ hours, and I will elaborate on the meaning of a Brechtian rehearsal process below.

The schedule is aimed at *actors who have little or no experience of Brechtian approaches to staging plays*. As can be seen in [this blog post](#), professional, amateur or student actors can apply their different talents and experiences to the same scheme of rehearsal; there is no need to differentiate between the actors' different statuses if they are new to Brechtian theatre.

The point of this sample schedule is to show that introducing a new methodology to actors *is* possible within the constraints of a four-week rehearsal period, as long as the director has a sense of what is required of a Brechtian production. The schedule is, of course, not binding, and directors should adapt it to their own needs. At present, it simply offers a model of how one might approach the task in hand.

The schedule also assumes two three-hour rehearsals taking place five days a week over four weeks (excluding a final production week). Different contexts can shape the schedule differently, of course: a ten-week university semester can re-distribute the elements of the schedule accordingly. The important thing is to understand the architecture of the approach.

In the following, I am considering that the play in question has four roughly equal sections – they may be acts, scenes, or a combination of both. It is, however, always sensible to break the four 'acts' down into more manageable sections, and I suggest that four to six sub-sections will allow for suitably details rehearsal in the initial phases of the schedule.

Finally, in my experience, four weeks is ample, and I have found that actors are neither under- nor over-rehearsed by the time production week arrives. The prerequisite for this time-scheme, however, is that the director understands the principles of the Brechtian method and is at home with them. These can be found by consulting both my book [Brecht in Practice](#) and other parts of the [brechtinpractice.org](#) website.

I would be really interested to hear how your rehearsals have gone and whether this schedule was useful. Please write to me at david.barnett@york.ac.uk with comments, thoughts or suggestions.

Preparatory Phase

Prior to rehearsal, the director (and, if available, the dramaturgical team) should research the social and historical contexts of the play's world in order to inform the choices available to the play's figures. For *Closer*, a play set in 1990s London, this involved teasing out the differences between social attitudes and definitions of class at that time and today. For *The Crucible*, the sociological research sought to understand the social structures of late C17 American Puritan society and the relationships between men and women.

In addition, research should be carried out into the plays themselves. This may involve consulting scholarly studies and articles, as well as perusing resources available on the internet, such as online reviews, videos, stills and documentations.

The director and/or the dramaturgical team should also attempt to prepare a [Fabel](#) for each act, scene and/or section. However, some plays, such as *Closer*, documented on this website, can [frustrate](#) this aim.

It is difficult to advise directors on how to prepare prior to each rehearsal as they, like the actors, should be working both with the *Fabel*, if possible, and with the principles of [inductive rehearsal](#). Even without a *Fabel*, a director can still approach rehearsal with a foreknowledge of the contradictions that are to be brought out, although the way(s) of doing this may only be revealed in rehearsal.

Day One: an all-day introduction to the basic principles of Brechtian theatre and how they inform the production itself.

I have tended to use the exercises 'Social Salutations' and 'Posh Restaurant' (both available for download in the 'Download Zone' of brechtinpractice.org). 'Social Salutations' is a deceptively simple exercise, but one with a great deal of mileage in it, especially once the director moves on to the aspect of showing the different relationships clearly to an audience. This can take some time, but is very useful both in establishing Brecht's as a theatre of showing and in introducing actors to the ways showing can be made manifest to an audience. The 'Posh Restaurant' then develops the skills of showing, but also invites the actors to make discoveries of their own for each action required by the exercise.

The day can be structured as follows:

- 10-11 Introductions; 'getting to know you' for the actors; gathering the actors' previous experiences of theatre-making (in order to contrast them, later on, with this production's approach)
- 11-1 Social Salutations. C. 90 mins on the exercise itself, followed by c. 30 mins of reflection and explication of the Brechtian concepts it explores
- 1-2 Break
- 2-4 The Posh Restaurant. As above, roughly three quarters of the time spent on the exercise and one quarter reflecting on what it was trying to do and how the sensibilities developed might inform the rehearsal process.
- 4-5 Introduction to the ways in which the ideas developed in the exercises will specifically help actors navigate the Brechtian production of the play you're rehearsing. Also, introduction to the ideas you are hoping to realize in the production, that is, the way a Brechtian analysis in the preparatory phase has helped you understand the play anew. Introduction and perhaps discussion of the contradictions the production will be aiming to articulate.

Phase One: Discovery (Days Two to Five)

When working with actors unfamiliar with the Brechtian method, the director needs to take a leading role in the rehearsal process. Actors will not necessarily be familiar enough with inductive rehearsal to play an active, contributory role at the beginning of the process.

I suggest that the initial phase concerns itself with two basic issues:

1. Negotiating the language of the play
2. Devising some provisional *Arrangements* so that the story of the section that's being rehearsed can be represented visually

I will take the two in turn.

1. The ways that language is used tells an audience a great deal about social relations between the figures. The 'Social Salutations' exercise should have introduced the actors to this idea through the many ways the words 'good morning' can be delivered. At this stage of rehearsal, thinking about relationships and how they might be articulated linguistically is important. A quick and effective approach can be to locate the stressed word in each sentence and understand why that word in particular requires emphasis. For directors less familiar with Brechtian rehearsal, this can be achieved without complicating the exercise with questions of placing actors on stage. Having the actors sit in a line, facing the director and delivering their lines to the director, rather than to the other figures, can focus the actors on what they're saying. Here, the director plays a crucial role by asking the central question 'why?' and offering his or her own suggestions, based on the social and historical research carried out in the preparatory phase. More experienced Brechtian directors can combine the linguistic exploration with provisional actor placement in an *Arrangement*.
2. The *Arrangement* tells the story of the scene, and that story usually sets out what the different figures can or can't do in the context of their society and their social position. In this phase, directors can check how well they're working by running the section without words and seeing whether the developing onstage relationships are clear.

I suggest that the play is broken down into four blocks, one for each day of rehearsal. Try then to break each block down into four to six smaller sections. This should give directors a good amount of time (45-60 minutes per section, with a 15-minute break at a suitable point) to probe the dramatic material and then run it at least once to consolidate some of the decisions that have been made.

If the production is fortunate enough to have a dramaturgical team or even a single dramaturge, it is great for them to make *Notate* (pronounced 'no-tart-ah' – stress on the 'tart') during rehearsals. *Notate* are not simply descriptive rehearsal notes, but reflective and analytical comments on the way the rehearsals have unfolded. *Notate* should be made available to the director for active input into the rehearsal process. And because the schedule proposes rehearsing sections every four or so days, dramaturges should be able to write up their *Notate* ahead of the next rehearsal of any particular section. (To aid the taking of *Notate*, dramaturge(s) might consider using electronic devices for ease of transforming notes into more coherent text.)

Phase Two: Forensic Rehearsal (Days Six to Nine)

This schedule proposes that you return to material from Phase One just less than a week after first approaching it. This should allow it to remain fresh in the actors' minds.

This phase is what I call 'forensic' rehearsal. It devotes the same amount of time to the sections as in Phase One, and the director and actors can move slowly through each section, making discoveries as they become more familiar with the decisions already taken. Of course, as rehearsals progress, initial decisions may be questioned and altered as greater clarity emerges as to the nature of the contradictions and relationships between the figures. In short, the actors develop a series of [*Haltungen*](#) towards the other figures as the rehearsals progress.

This phase is also the one in which the director works with the actors on precision and tries to establish the general rule of not walking and talking. By this I mean that only one thing happens at any moment of performance. So, a figure may deliver a line, but s/he can't also perform a gesture. Another figure may respond to a line or a gesture, but no-one else may talk or move. The aim of this constraint is to allow the actors (and, in performance, the audience) to see how chains of causes and effects unfold and develop over time. This idea is intimately connected to a '[theatre of showing](#)' where the audience's gaze is carefully guided from one thing to another.

By this time, some actors will have got the hang of inductive rehearsal, of teasing out contradictions and showing clearly the relationships between the figures of different social status. The director might find that s/he can move from actively directing text and movement to the role of 'lie detector'. Here the director asks the question as to whether the figures, understood in the context of their society and the circumstances of the scene, are acting [realistically](#). Over time, the shift from 'director' to 'lie detector' may become more pronounced. Here, the actors take greater responsibility for their decisions, the aim of inductive rehearsal.

Phase Three: Surgery (Days Ten and Eleven)

These two days can be divided into four half-days, one half day for each of the four blocks or acts of the play. In each half-day, the cast can return to certain scenes or sections that have proved difficult. As ever, the aim is to find clear and precise ways of signifying the social dynamics and contradictions of the sections being rehearsed.

By this phase, actors should be off-book and should thus have been working on learning their lines since Phase One. Brecht believed that actors shouldn't learn their lines too early because he feared the learning them in a certain way might limit the explorative potential of rehearsal. However, in such a compressed rehearsal schedule as this, directors may wish to encourage the actors to learn their lines earlier.

Phase Four: Block Runs, Part Runs and Full Runs (Days Twelve to Twenty)

If the rehearsal process has been successful this far, the director and the actors will have a tightly choreographed set of actions and deliveries that are not in some way arbitrary, but are based on the complex interactions between the different figures. The need for precision and clarity is exceptionally demanding, and the director is responsible for enforcing the discipline required for this kind of theatre. However, the effort also pays handsome rewards: the actors should understand *why* they are doing what they are doing throughout and thus be able to execute the detailed set of deliveries and movements with greater ease.

The nine days of this phase can be divided up as the director sees fit. In my experience, I have started with runs of the four blocks over two days: one block per half-day. This pattern is repeated once more so that the actors have a solid sense of how each block works from start to finish.

Once the actors have run the blocks, two blocks can be run together of a morning and two of an afternoon. This may be repeated the following day before a full run is attempted. The gradual building of familiarity and competence moves carefully from running single blocks to the entire play. I have found that by the time the first full run comes, the actors feel confident about what they are doing and *why*. They have had a good number of partial runs under their belts and are at a point where they can enter production week with one technical rehearsal, one dress, and three nights of performances.

Experience has also shown that *this* is the time to work with more attention to each figure's *Gestus*. This runs contrary to a more orthodox Brechtian approach that would start with actors developing *Gestus* and then adjusting it through different *Haltungen*. However, actors who have little familiarity with Brechtian theatre will have too much on their plate to consider nuance in delivery, physicality and the precision of not walking and talking. By considering *Haltung*, a more intuitive physical way of representing onstage relationships, earlier in the process, actors can start putting their different *Haltungen* together, considering and constructing a *Gestus* for their figure at this stage.