

The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui: Bertolt Brecht's parable play about the rise of Hitler

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Left-wing German dramatist Bertolt Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, a parable play about the political ascension of Adolf Hitler, was staged this month by the Department of Theatre and Drama at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Brecht, a refugee from Nazi Germany, wrote the play in several weeks in March and April 1941 while he was in Finland, awaiting a visa for the US. *Arturo Ui* was not produced until 1958, two years after Brecht's death, and not in English until 1961—although it was originally intended for the American stage.

The Ann Arbor production took considerable and conscientious care with Brecht's play and its concerns. The present world situation and the situation in the US in particular were clearly on the minds of the director, Malcolm Tulip, Assistant Professor of Theatre, and the student-actors.

The satirical play creates a parallel between the career of the Nazi leader and the rise of a fictional Chicago gangster, Arturo Ui. In a note in his journal for March 10, 1941, Brecht observed that he was "thinking of the American theatre, again struck by the idea I once had in New York, of writing a gangster play, that would recall certain events familiar to us all (*the gangster play we know*)." The latter of course referred to the career and coming to power of Hitler.

Although the play—divided into 15 scenes, a prologue and an epilogue—is designed to bring to mind specific historical events, the dramatist took pains to give "the 'masking' (which is an unmasking) some life of its own, i.e., it must ... also work independently of its topical references," otherwise "people would constantly be looking for the 'meaning' of this or that move, and would always be looking for the real-life model for every figure."

Brecht succeeded to a considerable degree, although Nazism and Germany are never far from view, nor intended to be.

The play follows the efforts of Ui, a thug down on his luck, to worm his way into and eventually dominate the vegetable trade in Chicago, and beyond. Times are hard for the "cauliflower trust," a group of businessmen (Flake, Caruther, Butcher, Mulberry and Clark). "It looks as if Chicago/The dear old girl, while on her way to market/Had found her pocket torn and now she's starting/To scabble in the gutter for her pennies."

The trust members succeed in getting the widely respected—but corrupt—businessman, Dogsborough ("The good old honest Dogsborough!/His hair is white, his heart is black"), to help obtain a loan for their business from city hall. Arturo Ui uses his knowledge of the illicit practices to make a deal with

Dogsborough: Ui and his men will shield Dogsborough from an investigation, and the latter will protect the gangsters from the local police.

Once he has taken over the vegetable trade in Chicago, and rubbed out a malcontent in his own ranks, Ernesto Roma, in an evocation of the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre, Ui sets his sights on Cicero. Ui has journalist Ignatius Dullfeet murdered, out of fear of his muckraking articles, and proceeds to woo Dullfeet's widow, Betty ("Now you stand defenceless/In a cold world where, sad to say, the weak/Are always trampled. You've got only one/Protector left. That's me, Arturo Ui.").

Having won out in Cicero, Ui has plans to expand rapidly his operations all over the country:

"Peace in Chicago's vegetable trade
Has ceased to be a dream. Today it is
Unvarnished reality. And to secure
This peace I have put in an order
For more machine-guns, rubber truncheons
Etcetera. For Chicago and Cicero
Are not alone in clamouring for protection.
There are other cities: Washington and Milwaukee!
Detroit! Toledo! Pittsburgh! Cincinnati!
And other towns where vegetables are traded!
Philadelphia! Columbus! Charleston! And New York!
They all demand protection! And no 'Phooey!'
No 'That's not nice!' will stop Arturo Ui!"

If Ui corresponds to Hitler, his henchmen Giuseppe Givola, Emanuele Giri and Ernesto Roma suggest Nazi leaders Joseph Goebbels, Hermann Göring and Ernst Röhm (murdered on Hitler's orders in the Night of the Long Knives in 1934), respectively. Dogsborough stands in for President Paul von Hindenburg, who appointed Hitler chancellor of Germany in January 1933, and Dullfeet represents Engelbert Dollfuss, the right-wing Austrian chancellor assassinated by Nazi agents in July 1934.

The play also includes an episode that alludes to the notorious Reichstag fire, the "terrorist" arson attack on the German parliament in February 1933 that the Hitler regime used as a pretext to institute dictatorial measures and carry out mass arrests of Communist Party members.

Its rich, captivating language is one of *Arturo Ui* strengths. As Stephen Parker in his recent biography of Brecht notes, “There are echoes of Shakespeare’s *Richard III* and *Julius Caesar*, and of Goethe’s *Faust*, as well as of Charlie Chaplin’s *Great Dictator*. Brecht’s use of roughly hewn blank verse in the grand style of the verse drama brilliantly counterpoints the sordid content of the dialogue.”

At any rate, the savage irony of gangsters declaiming in high-flown fashion, while plotting arson and murder, is only a slightly exaggerated and “unmasked” expression of the everyday reality of bourgeois political life, especially in our day.

It is all very amusing and very sinister at the same time, including the scene in which a second-rate actor tutors Ui on how to walk, stand, sit and speak (based on an actual incident). The scene concludes with Ui reciting Mark Antony’s speech over Caesar’s body in *Julius Caesar*, “a model of demagoguery.”

The play makes a strong impression, much stronger, in my view, than the works of that period for which Brecht is far better known, *Life of Galileo*, *Mother Courage and her Children*, *The Good Person of Szechwan* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, all of which suffer from political discouragement and an artistically pat and ultimately unconvincing approach. *Arturo Ui* is something of a revival of the sort of bitter, lively satire to be found in *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* (1929-31) and other earlier works.

The epilogue, spoken by the actor who plays Ui, is powerful and memorable (in any of the various translations):

“Therefore learn how to see and not to gape
To act instead of taking all day long
The world was almost won by such an ape!
The nations put him where his kind belong.
But don’t rejoice too soon at your escape
The womb he crawled from is still going strong.”

In the recent Ann Arbor production of *Arturo Ui* the décor was minimal, with few props or concrete references to Chicago or Germany. “We’re putting canvas on the floor,” director Malcolm Tulip told journalist Hugh Gallagher. “Brecht loved the idea of theater being like a boxing ring.”

The actors, all in white face, threw themselves into the work. Clearly, the present political and social conjuncture was a factor. Tulip told Gallagher, according to the latter, that “last year’s presidential campaign rhetoric made Brecht’s play appropriate for the times and the early stages of Trump’s administration have only increased the play’s immediacy.”

The director himself explained: “When Charlottesville happened, it was really out there with the Nazi symbols, the far-right symbols, it became more and more relevant. ... People say, ‘Well, you’re doing this because of Trump,’ and I say, ‘No. We’re doing the play because we’re asking the question ‘how does a mass of people put a person in power when that person might not work in the best interests of the mass of people?’ I think Brecht was looking at that, too. It wasn’t just about Hitler but about the people who put Hitler in power.”

Jesse Aaronson, who does an excellent job as Ui, told the same journalist, “I spent a lot of the summer researching Hitler ... I read parts of *Mein Kampf*, which was very difficult reading—one, because it’s poorly written; the translation I read focused on how Hitler wrote it, which was mad scrawlings.”

Aaronson added, “With Hitler, you can’t pass him off as a madman. ... He was very successful, he had the support of the people most of the time, and figuring out why that happened and how it happened has been a really interesting part of the process for me.”

“He was going to make Germany great again, he was the original make-the-country-great-again, he really was. ... He toured the country and said to the people, ‘I’m the guy for you.’” Aaronson wears a long red tie at one point.

The recognition of the threat represented by Donald Trump, Steven Bannon and the extreme right is entirely legitimate, and it is critical that students and young people are turning to a study of the historical issues and parallels.

However, the allusion to Hitler’s popularity and similar views underscore weaknesses in Brecht’s play and political standpoint.

When he portrays the support of big business for Hitler and the cowardly response or complicity of petty bourgeois layers, Brecht was on the mark. However, when the playwright moralized, “The play is not so much an attack on Hitler, but rather upon the complacency of the people who were able to resist him, but didn’t,” he was leaving out the decisive issue: the role of the parties that supposedly represented the German working class and were charged with defeating fascism through the socialist transformation of society. Hitler was only able to come to power through the bankruptcy, impotence and betrayals of those organizations.

Brecht omitted in particular the catastrophic role played by the Communist Party of Germany and the Stalinist apparatus in Moscow, the saboteurs of the German revolution, a party and an apparatus with which Brecht (despite misgivings and criticism) aligned himself.

Hitler’s horrible rise was indeed “resistible,” but Brecht’s remarkable play provides only a portion of the answer as to who was responsible for its coming to pass.



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