

# **DRAMA** *Works*

**Plays Through Practice**

**THE GOOD PERSON OF SZECHWAN**

**by**

**BERTOLT BRECHT**

**EXTRACT**

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## **A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE MAIN BRECHTIAN THEORIES**

I cannot believe that anyone studying this play would not be well-versed in Brechtian theory but, just in case, I have put down here a summary of the main points.

The remarkable thing you will find when working on any play that Brecht wrote is that, even without a knowledge of the theories, the writing forces his style on the actor. There is literally no other way of performing this or any other of Brecht's plays than in the epic style, though this is sometimes not obvious at a first reading. It is imperative that practical work is undertaken, where it quickly becomes apparent.

These are the main things one needs to remember about Brecht:

1. Brecht is a Marxist, who believes that the Communist creed may hold the answers for a horribly flawed and class-ridden society, where the poor are kept poor by the uncaring rich who exploit them.

2. Brecht wants to show that it does not have to be like this. Human beings have the power to choose: that is what makes them human. They can alter the world; once aware of the faults in their society, they can change it. All people, Brecht believes, have these choices - for good or ill.

3. For an audience to be able to recognise that something is wrong in their world and that that something can be altered, Brecht requires that audience to remain alert and aware. To help the audience with recognition, the actors and director too need to be conscious of what they are doing and why. The whole performance needs to be geared towards opening an audience's eyes to the world around them.

ALL THE THEORIES HANG UPON THE ABOVE PREMISES.

Brecht abhorred the naturalistic style of Stanislavski, because it kidded the audience into 'believing a lie'. He wanted to show the world as it is, because that is all that is relevant to an audience who need to know that things can be changed. Stanislavski fixes things in time. Characters behave as they do because of their pasts, their psychology, or whatever. Brecht felt that it is the time one lives in that moulds people's characters; everyone is a product of their society in their time. Given this, the play we are studying here must be placed somehow in a modern context to be truly Brechtian. Links with things going on around us, somewhere in our modern world ought to be made.

A Brechtian actor stays in his own head and is always aware of what he is doing. He selects aspects of a character in order to demonstrate that character to the audience. This selection is always conscious; never must the actor become immersed in the emotions or plight of his character to the exclusion of anything else.

The demonstrative style of acting involves *gest/gestus*. *Gest* is both an exaggeration of whatever traits about a character you, the actor, want to show an audience and an attitude you the actor has about those traits - an attitude you want the audience to share. Thus, if you want the audience to feel disgust at Mr Shu Fu and his horrid lust for Shen Teh, you, the actor playing Mr Shu Fu, would need to select and exaggerate those outward signs best calculated to invoke that disgust. Focusing on the outer signs of his feelings for Shen Teh might make you select the tongue constantly wetting the lips, the fast breathing, etc. You would need to pinpoint and clarify these outward signs so that they cannot be missed by an audience. They will see and dislike. Your attitude to the character you are playing is dislike - that is what you want the

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because they have to be instantly recognisable as soon as they enter the playing area. These outward signs are a part of gest, but only a part. The more important ingredient is attitude. It is attitude that keeps the actor from becoming the character, keeps him safely outside it, so that he can select details with which to lead an audience's opinion about that character.

With this in mind, revisit each one of these pair entries. Do you want an audience to sympathise, condemn, feel anger towards, pity - or whatever - your particular beggar, businessman and so on. Spend a minute or two thinking about that and then select something that will help lead the audience. For instance, one beggar might be lazy and shiftless, another might feel the world owes him something and be angry with his lot, another still might be unable to help the circumstances that has got him there and be truly pitiable. How do you manipulate an audience to how you see your character?

### **WORKING THROUGH THE TEXT IN A PRACTICAL WAY**

*From the beginning the exercises assume a knowledge of the story-line and what happens to the characters. It is important, therefore, that before you start the following work you will have read the play. At the very least, you should have read the plot outline and character notes that precede this section.*

*I try never to be dictatorial in the practical work. There is no version that is more right or more wrong than another. What the following work hopes to encourage is the habit of experiment. Too often, when you read a line it is the first meaning that becomes fixed in the mind.*

*It is important that you also get in the habit of recording the results of all the work you do. When experimenting with a character this is especially important. At the end you will need to go through all your work on each character and on your design choices once more, checking that your decisions make sense.*

## **PROLOGUE**

*Three of the gods come to earth having heard that it is not possible to be good in the world they have created. They are beginning to be disheartened, having failed to find any good person so far. Wang, the water-seller, is looking out for them, to give them the honour they deserve. He tries to find one person to put them up for the night but fails. What is more, he knows that he is not worthy to be called a good person because he cheats his customers by having a water container with a false bottom; his customers are paying for more water than they are actually getting. He is afraid the gods will discover this. In desperation he persuades a prostitute, Shen Teh, to put the gods up for the night, even though this means she will lose a customer. However, ashamed that the gods have discovered his cheat and afraid that Shen Teh will not honour her promise, Wang runs away and hides. But Shen Teh finds the gods and treats them well. In gratitude, after some concern lest she boast of her good fortune, the gods give her some money in payment for their night's lodging.*

In preparation for the first task - a preliminary discussion on setting - the class needs both to have read the play and made a note of the different settings required. A quick way of doing this is to look at my plot outline which gives the different settings at the beginning of each scene.

Brecht's ideas on setting are well-known. Reading the introduction to the Methuen student edition, which lists many productions over the years, it is clear that there are many precedents you could follow. Some pick out the poverty emphasised by Wang

in his opening speech and create a setting made up of planks, barbed wire, hessian sacks, slabs of cement, and so on. Others go for a more stylised Oriental effect.

Start by discussing the pros and cons of both these. The first idea can be made specific to a particular place [as one Italian version did by creating an Italian shanty town], so you could have, for instance, the feeling of a Northern industrial estate, with huge smoking chimneys in the background, or the kind of 'towns' that spring up in parts of South America, or Africa, on the outskirts of cities - sprawling huts made of corrugated iron, sacking doorways and roughly cobbled together walls. Such a place would emphasise the poverty of the region and the bleak prospects of those struggling for work within such an environment.

One past version had the auditorium done up like a factory, emphasising the destined work of many at the poorer end of the social scale. How would you bring such an idea into a design for the stage? A revolve which the characters have to push with effort to change scenes? Conveyor belts at the edges of the stage, along which perhaps the gods could be brought in? A suggestion of machines, of doors, of clanging metal shutters?

Or perhaps you will favour the Oriental version: the sides of the stage pinned with 'silk', with Chinese lettering written large, bamboo screens [as one early version employed] - which can be moved to denote changes of place.

Brecht tends to place his plays in pre-technological settings. Even the factory uses manpower rather than machinery. The main weight of the play lies in the effect of poverty and joblessness on people. Of course, you may want to bring the play up to date by suggesting modern workplaces, and this too should be discussed.

Many of the settings are quite open: in front of, or behind, the tobacconist shop, a square, a street, a park, a seedy restaurant, a court-room. The exceptions are Shen Teh's tobacconist shop and the tobacco factory where there is some necessity for the establishment of place, especially with the former.

I once saw a touring cast perform this play [very well indeed] with a cast of 5 - very busy - people and a trucked on shop front, which had windows and hatches that could be opened and which could be reversed to show shelves and a counter for the shop. The whole edifice was permanently onstage, altering slightly by the opening or closing of its many apertures. For instance, one panel turned to reveal the logo for 'Shen Teh's Tobacconist Shop'. Other panels announced such settings as were necessary. In addition, there were hooks built in, where people could change character by adding or subtracting a part of their costume. It was multi-purpose and effective, leaving the large majority of the playing area free to become 'any place.'

A free discussion where such options are put forward and explored verbally will also introduce many other aspects of Brechtian playing. It will emphasise for the students the main features and themes of the play. Choices made at this stage are by no means fixed, but some will start to make preferences here which will perhaps guide them in other choices along the way.

For the purpose of working practically through the play, the group need to use the playing space as an open place, fitting their own setting ideas in as each scene is worked on.

### **Page 3.**

The Prologue is set in a street. Wang the water-seller could live in this very street. On many occasions, Brecht specifies that he emerges from the culvert where he sleeps at night. A culvert is a ditch or a channel which he could emerge from somewhere on or under the stage. Depending on your setting, Wang could live in a large piece of piping, a ditch covered with cardboard, corrugated iron or plastic [the stage trap-door?], or simply huddle in a door-way. It depends on the statement you want to make with him. He is close to the bottom rung of the working poor, only surpassed by the jobless poor.

How modern do you want to make him? Is he carrying buckets on a yoke across his

shoulders, with ladle/scoops for the water? Is he [as I experienced in La Place at Marrakesh recently] carrying trays of plastic water bottles to hawk to passers-by? Does he have a little hand-cart carrying containers of water, either old-time or modern? [This has the advantage of freeing the actor's hands.]

What state of mind should Wang show at the opening of his speech? **Try the first section of the speech up to and including: 'For the last three days ... so that I may be the first to greet them.'**:

**fast and eager; he is buoyed up by excitement at seeing these gods tired and hopeless at first, with the emergence of slight hope on the last sentence**

**neutral, speaking quite slowly and clearly - this has the effect of a touch of cynicism from the mention of the gods onwards**

Which comes over in the way you want? What effect do you want to aim for in this opening?

What kind of 'gods' are expected? What can you tell about Brecht's attitude to religion from Wang's expectations? It appears that these gods have little to do with mankind and their lives. They are out of touch, rarely seen. Yet Wang expects something. His attitude is much like someone waiting for the arrival of a rock star, or royalty. Yet his humility is touching and puts the audience on his side. He is sure he is not important enough for them, but if he spots them first, perhaps they will take a little notice of him.

The next section of the speech is full of political statements about the classes. Start with an exercise in which the class are both reminded of *gestus* and the need for clarity of facial and body movement that accompanies it. **Make group tableaux of the following:**

**servants and master/mistress**

**slaves and overseer**

**office workers and tyrannical boss**

**factory workers and factory owner showing a group of his friends around**

**beggars - the unemployed poor - in a street where wealthy businessmen work**

Remember that *gestus* is both clear body and facial language [plus appropriate voice] which communicates a clear message to an audience who, in these cases, have sympathy for the working-classes and dislike, even condemnation, of the upper classes.

**Starting with your frozen tableau for each of the above, move the scene using appropriate vocal tones for each speaking character. Keep the clarity of the message throughout.**

**Finally, with the whole class, try some crowd movements where a clear *gestus* is made of:**

**a) the labourers bent from long hours under heavy loads**

**b) people who are 'at most' clerks 'in a cement works'. That is, they are also poor and down-trodden, ill-used, though not manual workers. Think of Bob Cratchit, Scrooge's clerk in *A Christmas Carol*.**

**c) the gentlemen who 'have the brutal faces of men who beat people'**

Reading through the scene again, what statement would you like to make with the appearance of the gods? They could be colourful and absurd; or like politicians out on a fact-finding mission. They could be shabby, their rich clothes showing signs of wear and tear. The way they walk and talk needs to match your decision.

Of course the gods do not all need to be male.

**Try them:**

**very over-the-top, as if unused to walking in dirty streets, picking their way fastidiously, hands held high to express their disgust at the surroundings. Their walks could each be very**

**exaggeratedly 'silly'  
like practical business-men, looking round with interest, taking notes  
and photographs, tut-tutting in disapproval, their  
movements and walks neat and precise**

**a mixture of the above, differentiating each of the three**

**Discuss also other options, such as entering on bizarre 'vehicles' - a bicycle with Heath Robinson additions such as a parasol and a fan and a reclining seat. One entering on smallish stilts, all entering in a small car, or a tuk-tuk or rickshaw, sliding down a rainbow, or down a long staircase preceded by the sounds of an aeroplane. You could add to these possibilities the pink cloud which ascends at the end to take them back to heaven. Might you want the sandwich effect of using that here too?**

I am sure you will find other ideas to add to these. The idea is to have fun with the three. They are fantasy characters. The statement you are making with them emphasises either their uselessness [out-of-touch etc.], or their being out-of-date, or their being not much better than one of the human ruling-classes, unaware of or disinterested in the problems facing the poor. The latter allies the gods with the audience so that both are educated in the difficulties of being 'good' in the world as it is, during the course of the play.

**With the whole group used to establish the street, try the whole speech now, using the decisions you have made so far.**

#### **Page 4.**

Of the three gods, the third one appears the most naive and approachable and the second the most cynical and hard-line. The First God appears the most aloof. But you can of course make your own decisions. They could be characterised, making clear differences between them, or you might want them to be interchangeable, identical, with matching movements and facial expressions and somewhat distant, robotic voices. Discuss this and as you work through the scene make the decisions which make the most sense to you.

The Second God tells us later that he noticed Wang's bottle/water container has a false bottom, making it look as though you are getting more for your money. Does he need to react now, when Wang offers them all a drink? If he does react now, it must be subtle.

How will you do the houses and multiple doors? It could be built into your set - perhaps a poor street scene with working doors as a permanent backing, in front of part of which can be the tobacconist which later becomes Shen Teh's shop. This latter could be trucked on and off as necessary, or could be a part of the general background throughout.

Or you can make easily moveable representative 'doors' out of bamboo canes, or light portable screens perhaps.

Or you can simply do something more stylised: the people in the street creating a line, backs to audience, and standing still until 'activated' by Wang's mimed knock.

Discuss these options and make decisions, having tried out what you can.

The pleasantness with which the gods address Wang and he them ought to be made to look as Oriental as possible. Plenty of bowing to each other, placing hands together in the prayer position, as polite Orientals do. The bows vary from a slight inclination of the upper body to little more than a dip of the head.

**Try out Wang's three excuses from Mr Fo, Widow Su and Mr Cheng, building the artificial brightness of his smile until it is stiff with anxiety.**

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Poor Wang has to think fast with his excuses. By the time he comes back from Mr Cheng's he is clearly losing the ability to 'wing it' any longer.

**Try from 'Between ourselves, I think there are evil men... to the end of the speech, making 'That must be it':**

**high and almost hysterical - he is losing the plot  
very definite and sincere - trying hard to convince them with his  
'certainty'**

**seeing the consternation of the gods, after a pause, more doubtfully -  
a throw-away in a tiny uncertain voice**

**In each case, try the result with the gods reacting and carry on with the next few lines - up to the Second God's 'Rubbish...'**

**For the hysterical version, it is Wang who is obviously frightened too - his lines would follow in the same high rushed tone.**

**The slow, definite version might elicit a longish pause from the gods as they exchange puzzled looks. There is then genuine bewilderment in 'Are we all that frightening?' Wang's responses continue at the same deliberate pace, though 'I suppose' shows he is looking at them for clues - guessing.**

**The doubtful version comes about because of the doubt in the gods themselves, though they are too polite to say so. They are, however, concerned. Try 'Are we all that frightening?' with sincere worry that people are not understanding their intentions as they would wish. Wang's responses then become more confidently explanatory, as between friends.**

The Second God's angry explosion about the dam, shows how little real effectiveness these gods have. They are an idea that is no longer relevant in people's lives. The real management of their lives is down to humanity alone. Do you think Brecht is making a wider judgement about all religion [Communism banned organised religions, cf Marx's 'Religion is the opium of the people']?

**Show Wang's hesitancy in the street - which lasts a long time, but must not be so extreme as to draw audience attention too much away from the gods' conversation. How do you show a man unable to make up his mind? It always helps if you try over-exaggerating first - making gestures and facial expressions large and clear, before bringing these gestures back to more subtle versions of the same.**

**For instance, expressions of anxiety, panic, distress, will cross his face whilst his body may make leanings and small movements towards one direction, followed by another - and so on.**

The gods watch him for a little, clearly reading his body language, before speaking.

As ever, it is the Second God who reacts first and cynically. He is the one who doesn't expect to find anyone 'good' and god-fearing in Szechwan. The Third makes excuses for Wang and, unwilling to condemn mankind, it is he who sees good in Wang. The First keeps the balanced middle view. Wait and see is the tone.

Is there an echo of Sodom and Gomorrah here? In that biblical story, if God found just one good person then the cities would be spared from destruction. The parallel seems clear to me, which gives this whole visit a threatening quality that might otherwise be lacking. It would explain the Third God's anxiety, for instance.

## **Page 6**

With the Third God trotting over to Wang, to try to prove to himself and his fellow gods that mankind is not lost and that Wang himself is a good sort, the other two are left talking to each other.

What is the tone of the First God's discovery that Wang's water container has a false bottom? **Try:**

horror  
reluctant surprise  
outrage - how dare he?  
disappointment - an attitude as if this is just a petty annoyance, not important in the grand scheme of things.

Which leads most easily into his next speech? Try the two running together to test your decision.

Do you think the First God needs to remain cool and aloof? Try from 'We must find someone...' onwards:

remaining cool, not really that concerned  
with a hint of desperation, as if he feels he [and they] are losing the threads that keep them linked with humanity  
rather teacherish, professorial - as if explaining an academic equation or problem.

Perhaps the Third God has darted back and caught the drift of the First God's speech. He goes back to plead once more with Wang. This would start building a nervous jerky kind of movement that might suit him and act as a contrast to the others.

Work out how you would communicate the Third God's 'conversation' with Wang which acts as a visual background to the dialogue between the First and Second Gods. Build in the respectful way with which the gods talk to others. This would underline the old-fashionedness of these characters, who Brecht is displaying as outmoded.

**Now show this whole little section, running into the Third God's 'Is it too difficult...?' which might be with an undertone of pleading desperation, or very firmly - suggesting that this is a last chance.**

Wang naturally blames himself, desperate not to display to the gods that people don't care about them. Keeping up the myth that anyone would be delighted to put such honoured guests up for the night, it must be his fault.

The Third God rejoins his colleagues, presumably happy to show that his unshaken optimism has been rewarded.

Again, work out what is happening between the three whilst Wang tries to persuade the gentleman and then Shen Teh. There are a number of possibilities:

**They freeze into attitudes of benign indifference, stern dignity and [in the case of the third] concern. These could be done in a series of extreme, even comical, positions, depending on how you have decided to present them**

**like clockwork wind-ups, they move in extreme slow motion from one position to the other - e.g. one taking out a large magnifying glass and stooping ever so slowly to examine something distasteful on the ground**

**they talk in a huddle, like a football scrum, in which we see first one and then another emerge, look at the progress Wang is making, shake his head sadly and return to the huddle**

**all three put on god-like aspects aimed at commanding respect from the Gentleman and Shen-Te, with exaggerated smiles, hands raised in blessing, and so on. The results will look false and could well inspire the gentleman to see them as swindlers**

**Experiment on these lines and any others of your own.**

Revisit the work you did on establishing the busy street. If you have a big enough group, the mix of people with their clear gestures of who and what they are, should have been carrying on throughout all of what is going on.

You could have built in more of an attitude of disdain for the gods through the  
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