

# **DRAMA** *Works*

**Plays Through Practice**

**THE RESISTIBLE RISE OF ARTURO UI**  
by  
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**EXTRACT**

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# Extract

## WORKING THROUGH THE PLAY IN A PRACTICAL WAY

### PROLOGUE

In true Brechtian style, the Prologue introduces us to some of the main characters and tells us about certain of the events to be portrayed. The stage directions make this clearer still, with the insistence on 'notices attached to the curtains' relating, in newspaper headlines, the same scandals that the Announcer mentions in his speech.

In this way, the element of surprise is taken from us; we are told what to expect: gangsters, scandals, corruption. The last lines broaden this out:

'The gangster play that we present  
Is known to our whole continent',

thus alerting spectators to a wider context than a mere gangster story.

In addition, the style of the writing - heroic couplets, deliberately demeaned by slangy expressions - 'What a sell!' 'Pipe down, you boys...' 'Okay, beat it!..' etc. is another form of 'alienation', as are the allusions - sustained throughout the play - to classical models such as, in particular, Shakespeare. This language, which is deliberately ragged and ametrical, works against our expectation, literally jolts us into alertness, a way of watching that would not be possible with smooth-flowing rhythms and a subtler style of scansion. Brecht was excited by the possibilities of a 'formal' way of writing which works against the audience's expectation of such a style, creating "a modern verse with irregular rhythms, which could lead to great things."

We are reminded that actors perform the roles:

'Brilliant performers will portray  
The most eminent gangsters of our day...'

another distancing technique, to prevent the audience's desire to become immersed in the characterisation. Though, in fact, the epic style of the whole play - episodes that are complete in themselves and that do not lead seamlessly into each other, being separated often by time and by place and which deal with entirely different incidents - would make it difficult for any audience to become 'carried away.'

Let's look first of all at the setting implications imposed by the play as a whole. This is important at the outset since any group in rehearsal needs to know the sort of space in which they will be working.

It quickly becomes obvious that realistic settings will not work. Just to look at the first few scenes alone proves this:

The Financial District  
Outside the Produce Exchange  
Back room in Dogsborough's Restaurant  
Bookmaker's Office .... and so on

Clearly representative sets will be the order of the day.

**Discuss as a whole group, first of all, what implications so many settings have for the staging of the play. Ask yourselves:**

**What sort of stage might be suitable? Brecht used a proscenium arch stage for most of his productions, but is this necessarily the best form of presentation? What are its advantages and disadvantages? [For instance, the framing device of the arch, which sets the action back at one remove from the audience might be something worth considering, from a 'distancing' point of view {Verfremdungseffekt}]**

**Other possibilities ought to include a consideration of whether the audience ought to be brought in closer to the action - by using a small open stage for instance, such as in a studio theatre - or by using a thrust out into the audience. Though an audience's closeness might be anti-Brechtian, students need to decide how far they are going to adhere to Brechtian**

principles. Might there be a case for using shock tactics in this play? For adopting a different style altogether - a more Artaudian one, perhaps? At least at certain moments?

The play could work in promenade perhaps, with various scenes set up in different areas of a hall, moving the audience from area to area. This might add to the fairground effect and be useful for creating the impression of the crowds who turn up to hear Ui's speech, and so on. This method might also allow for more complex settings which can be changed and reset behind the audience's back, as it were, whilst they are focusing their attention elsewhere.

Equally playing it in the round, or in arena shape has potential for surrounding audience, making entrances through the audience, but would minimise setting to props and furniture mainly. [Arena settings give the advantage of a single side against which a more permanent structure can be placed.]

Having decided what staging would be most suitable to go with, discuss how each new setting might be best indicated. Would you want to have an overall setting that does not change against which each scene is represented?

Consider different levels. The front cover of my copy of the text shows Ui as Hitler on a very high podium which he climbs up to from behind to address the crowds. You could use this sort of an idea, or perhaps make the height a longer 'wall' which can represent a back street wall, or a dingy room, or whatever you want. This high podium, if used, could rotate to show different faces for different scenes perhaps. The stairs up which Ui mounts for his harangue could double as a dock for the trial scene, and so on.

Decide whether you would want Brechtian style screens which can change from scene to scene or whether some sort of backdrop or wall would be appropriate, perhaps covered in Nazi symbols or graffiti. Then again this back wall could be as described above - a rotating one.

Would you want something altogether more threatening - a set made up of tall rectangular shapes, maybe, casting shadows over the stage and making for many surprising entrances? Perhaps these shapes could be angled differently for different scenes? Pushed together for some, pulled apart for others? How would you make them easily manoeuvrable?

Or a set made up of different levels of platform and scaffolding - again which would make sinister prison-like shadows and threatening shapes.

Use all the above as a way of kick-starting your discussion. Bear in mind the different settings that are needed within the play.

As you work practically through the play, some of these ideas may change. But for now, go with one of the ideas that excites or interests the whole group and set the studio or stage space on which your lessons will be held into as close an approximation to this decision as you can. It may be that you simply indicate a back podium, for instance, by having a rostrum block upended - and so on. This set-up should be born in mind throughout every lesson, to see how your actions will work within that set-up and what further additions might enhance the events being exposed.

Let's return specifically to the setting for the Prologue now. Brecht indicates a fairground type stage with a front curtain on which signs have been attached. The signs have the typesetting, enlarged, of newspaper headlines and cover events that occur throughout the whole play. Behind the curtain, Brecht indicates that popular dance music should be played.

The whole action of the scene occurs in front of this curtain with each character pushing through the centre divide to parade before the footlights.

If you envisage the play happening on a large open stage, for instance, it may be worth considering trucking on a small fairground podium to place towards the front of the main acting area and reducing the lighting to encompass only this centre front area. A touch may be to have the lighting on this opening scene wobbly and hand-held - a follow-spot perhaps - to give a more fairground ramshackle feel. There could be a tawdry red curtain, which opens in the centre by hand.

A smaller stage setting could retain this fairground feel throughout. It depends on the effect you want to make - and it is a crucial choice this. Should Arturo Ui be presented as a comedy act - something that diminishes through ridicule; an effect that would be as if saying to an audience: look how ridiculous these characters are. All it would take is a few of you sensible people to get together and stand against them... Or should it be altogether more sinister and frightening in the end? Do the audience need more of a jolt?

**Consider then the following options to the opening setting:**

**as indicated above, a smaller fairground type stage trucked on; curtains; fairground or dance music; wobbly hand-held light**

**the whole stage or acting area used**

**the headlines: pinned to the curtain as indicated and already in place, brought on one by one by actors and pinned ceremoniously to the curtains - this would make more of the signs and ensure an audience read each one**

**shouted out like newspaper headlines by actors running across holding newspapers and advertising the latest scandal, or running through the audience**

**projected onto a screen or screens - one at a time? This could also include footage or photographs of Germany and Hitler from this period interspersed with gangster movie stills**

Whatever your decision here - a decision about the final taste you want the play to leave for the audience - this opening appears light and in true *Verfremdungseffekt* manner points out that the parts are all to be played by actors. This is not real life.

There are, however, always options. **Try the opening few lines of the Announcer's speech:**

**light and jovial - the voice raised to attract attention and bring in the punters - as if at a fairground and competing for custom**

**as if this is the most important material in the world and you really want to make each point telling. You want to shock**

**as if 'the boys in the back row' are in fact Nazi thugs though the Announcer doesn't realise it at first. In this version, try out with the rest of the group acting as audience including Nazi bovver boys, who are trying to undermine the Announcer's speech. As the Announcer realises what is happening he and his actors continue but it is clear that they are being brave and defiant. Luckily the thugs are too thick to realise completely that they are being mocked and not flattered. See how this reading alters the way the speech is done. For this version try the whole speech, though you can imagine the other actors**

**stepping through the curtains for the moment.**

**Which version do you like best? Which works best with the idea of the presentation of the play that you want to go with?**

As each character is introduced, decide whether it is clumsy to have each one stepping through the curtain. Would it be better for Old Dogsborough to perhaps open the curtain but then to leave it open, so that each of the other characters can make more of an impact?

**Using a variety of hats, try each character entering normally and then putting on the hat and thus the character during the Announcer's introduction. It doesn't matter if you have the 'right' hat for the character, the idea is simply to 'put on' the character with the hat. If you do have the 'right' hats, Dogsborough's could be a top hat, or a General's helmet whilst the others should have 1930s style gangster hats.**

**Thus each character adopts a characteristic pose with the hat and then walks forward in a characteristic walk, different from their own when they entered.**

**Decide on the ways of moving for each character, making sure that each one is different.**

**Dogsborough could be tall and erect, though with a tremor in his hands and his head from his age;**

**Givola could walk in a bow-legged rolling way;**

**Giri with a spring in his step, twirling his hat on his finger before putting it on at a jaunty angle [Giri and hats are a gestic feature of his character, so emphasise the hat and how he uses it if you can];**

**Ui needs to be more sinister, moving slower perhaps.**

**Try a game with the four hats, making sure that each hat is different. Like pass the parcel, this is pass the hats. When the music stops whoever is holding a hat has to put it on and make a pose, followed by a few steps of a walk, in that character.**

**Alternatively, use only one hat but announce which of the four characters you are going to play with, e.g. do several rounds when each person who ends up with the hat has to be Ui, several rounds as Giri, and so on.**

**This game will allow some development of walks and mannerisms and also remind everyone of the need to be able to put on characters and take them off again. Any group of actors might end up doubling several times in this play, playing many roles.**

Develop mannerisms for each of the three main gangsters. Bearing in mind the need for instant recognition, what else can be done to develop the 'outward signs' of these characters? Most of this will not be seen in this first introduction, but if you have worked out other 'outward signs' to be used further on in the piece, this will make your first entrance more assured.

Givola first. Givola is Goebbels, the propaganda king who had a lot to do with disseminating bad feeling against the Jews in particular. He was a journalist, an author and a playwright. He was also a Doctor of Philosophy - a clever man. A brilliant speaker, highly intelligent, he was completely loyal to Hitler. He was also crippled, walking with a distinctive limp.

**Try out different ways of walking with a limp, searching for**

**a] the most sinister and**

**b] the most absurd.**

**Which would suit your purpose better?**

The play calls him 'the horticulturist', because he is represented as the owner of a flower-shop. Bouquets and wreaths from his shop adorn the dead. Is Brecht making a metaphor of this - the flowers being the clever words that Goebbels could manipulate to serve any purpose? Can the idea of 'the horticulturist' be built into a characterisation? It could be simply a beautiful flower that he has in his button-hole and that he twirls at times of stress. Could he have, say, a daisy, or a mini-wreath in his pocket which he places on the breast of every victim? Roma refers to Giri with 'a posy in his buttonhole.' Does Givola give him a fresh posy for each new murder perhaps? See what other gestic mannerisms you can come up with for this character.

**Once you have experimented a little with the possibilities, try walking and standing in typical poses.**

Second is Giri. Giri is Goering, who was a much-decorated pilot who became head of the Luftwaffe [the Airforce]. He was also put in charge of German economy up to 1942. A great lover of luxury - Goering had been born of a wealthy family - he loved the showmanship of garish uniforms. It was Goering who plundered the art galleries and museums of Europe during the war. He was known to be a recreational drug user.

Brecht refers to Goering's love of show by using the gestic metaphor of hats. Giri takes the hat of every victim he murders and is seen wearing it next time he appears on stage. What else might help make clear the link between Giri and Goering? Perhaps he can ostentatiously sniff cocaine up his nose? Perhaps he can wear spats and shiny patent-leather shoes? It makes sense for dapper Giri to wear a button-hole - a flower from Givola's flower-shop. Acting-wise, play with the idea of showmanship - and a way of handling his latest hat. One company I saw years ago performing this play had Giri's hats on a rack, always visible, at the back of the stage. During the play, the empty hooks filled up with more and more hats to emphasise the increase in his victims. Each new hat he twirled and wore at a cocky angle. Each old hat was tossed with masterly precision to hang on an empty hook. Giri's very jauntiness gathered a horrible sort of momentum and came to be seen as sinister.

**Try Giri's walk and stance:**

**with cocky arrogance - head back, looking down his nose  
as a likeable rogue - jokey, moving like a comedian - making false  
trips and then pointing at the audience with wide  
silent guffawing mouth to elicit a laugh  
as a conjuror - bringing hats from behind his back, a gun from out  
of his sleeve, flourishes with a handkerchief - now  
you see it, now you don't....  
as a fussy dresser, pocket handkerchief just so, peeping out of  
his top pocket - some eccentricities of dress, such  
as colourful suits - with the mannerisms to go with  
this. An almost feminine brushing of the collar, an  
avoidance of 'dirt', fastidiously holding people at a  
distance should they come too close.**

You may find other ways of doing him, of course, or a combination of some of these ideas. Any of the above will contrast suitably horribly with his enjoyment of murder.

Thirdly is Ui himself. This character will change during the course of the play - his mannerisms and so on becoming gradually more and more like Hitler's. Here, you need to decide whether as an introduction, Ui should be shown in his final stage - i.e. as Hitler - or whether he should just be portrayed at this point as a classic thug. There are arguments for either decision. If he is shown as Hitler, then the audience, in Brechtian style, have an inkling of what the play is about. Surprise is taken away. If he is shown as a thug merely, this, in combination with the signs or headlines that make it clear to an audience that the play is about Hitler, tells an audience the low esteem with which the character is to be viewed.