



Brecht in 2017: Alienation vs. Immersion

By Marina J. Bergenstock

Like many of my colleagues, after the results of the most recent presidential election were announced, I felt myself questioning what I could do to effect change in Trump's America. When, as a Visiting Assistant Professor at Beloit College, I was asked to direct *Arturo Ui*, I wondered if that was the chance I needed to "resist" with my students and colleagues. While I expected to use Brechtian aesthetics of estrangement to achieve this political resistance, the response from audience and student participants in the production suggests that the ultimate effect was a paradoxical combination of immersion and alienation.

The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui, written in 1941 as a satirical political allegory, chronicles the rise of the Chicago gangster Arturo Ui and his attempts to control the cauliflower racket through any means necessary. With the current administration, the time felt ripe to bring this play back to the stage. But doing so made me question a lot of the same things that Brecht had questioned—can theatre be used to elicit social change? What theatrical techniques can be used to draw an audience's attention toward the parallels in their own lives? If our primary audience is an already liberal-leaning student body, are we just "preaching to the choir"? Can *Arturo Ui* be a call to action when America has committed to this current administration for

four years? What does Epic Theatre look like in 2017? Does Brecht have a place in 21st century America?

Though the play wasn't produced until 1958, two years after his death, Brecht intended it to be an allegory of Hitler's "power usurpation."¹ Brecht wrote *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* as a way to remind us that the worst socio-political events don't just happen, but rather are results of circumstances that develop over time. I am reminded of John Stuart Mill's most famous quote from an address to the University of St. Andrews in 1867: "Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing." Inspired by both Brecht and Mill, I hoped to elucidate this idea as a central theme in my production of *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*.

I had worked out a concept for the show that there would be five "main" characters who would remain in one role in one costume for the duration of the entire show. The other actors would play multiple characters, switching in and out of roles in front of the audience (we called these roles the ensemble roles). This concept stemmed from the idea that I wanted it to feel like the actors had chosen to put the show on in the Neese Theatre as one of many stops and that the ensemble was actively illustrating and pointing at the problems that the main characters were posing. This way, the audience always had an ally in those ensemble characters and also would not be able to be swept up in the "gangster story" completely. This also allowed the five "principal" actors to really appear like well-dressed businessmen. *Ui* may be a

¹ Finkle, David. "The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui: Bertolt Brecht's Anti-Tyrant Allegory Doesn't Rise High Enough." New York Stage Review. November 15, 2018. Accessed March 1, 2019. <http://nystagereview.com/2018/11/14/the-resistible-rise-of-arturo-ui-bertolt-brechts-anti-tyrant-allegory-doesnt-rise-high-enough/>.

gangster story, and I wanted the audience to begin to question the gangsters that they saw in front of them—put together business-people who look great, seem smart enough, and somehow control the world. Ui, Roma, Dogsborough, Giri, and Givola would remain constant throughout, in order to keep the illusion of them being “snazzy” businessmen.

Casting allowed for a Brechtian intervention with regard to gender. We had a cast of 15 college students, all entirely female or non-binary. For a play where only 2 of the 31 roles were written specifically for female characters, I was pretty excited about the version of the play I was about to direct. In a play making such a big political statement, it seemed fitting to have a cast that could be construed as making a political statement about representation, gender, and performance. We set out to dive more deeply into the performativity of gender and embraced the challenge of holding a mirror to society while in the throes of repeating history.

Brecht thought double casting was important because he didn’t want the audience to willingly suspend disbelief and become immersed in the play, and our double casting was the first epic theatre element we went forward with. The scenic design aided us in our Epic pursuits with the Chicago skyline in the background while the middle of the stage had an immovable boxy-structure on it, and the most downstage area had moveable crates (these were symbolizing vegetable crates, since the focus is on Chicago’s vegetable industry in the play). These crates shifted from scene to scene to form different playing spaces for the actors. Upstage there was a costume rack, and the sides of the middle structure also had hooks on it for costume storage. The 10 actors that changed characters had on a base outfit of “Beloit clothes” and, when they became someone else, they would add a piece or two to suggest that character. These actors also remained seated on stage the entire time.

Because Brecht wanted his audience to be able to form opinions and considered his theatre to be didactic, and especially because I directed this piece in an educational setting, when the audience walked in, there were pieces of dramaturgy dealing with Brecht or Epic Theatre on the seats. In addition to having the actors sit on stage, there were also 10 audience seats on stage up for grabs every night. These seats were free to anyone willing to sit on a backless vegetable crate for the duration of the performance. Fifteen minutes before the show started, the cast (the 10 actors who became different characters) would come into the house to hang out with the audience. They would engage them in conversations about themselves as college students, the dramaturgy on their seats, about Brecht. . . anything that came up between them was fair game. Part of this was in an effort to address what Brecht had written:

A theatre which makes no contact with the public is a nonsense. Our theatre is accordingly a nonsense. The reason why the theatre has at present no contact with the public is that it has no idea what is wanted of it. It can no longer do what it once could, and if it could do it it would no longer wish to. But it stubbornly goes on doing what it no longer can do and what is no longer wanted. All those establishments with their excellent heating systems, their pretty lighting, their appetite for large sums of money, their imposing exteriors, together with the entire business that goes on inside them: all this doesn't contain five pennyworth of fun. There is no theatre today that could invite one or two of those persons who are alleged to find fun in writing plays to one of its performances and expect them to feel an urge to write a play for it. They can see at a glance that there is no possible way of getting any fun out of this. No wind will go into anyone's sails here. There is no "sport."²

Some traditional Brechtian signage options were used that gave our production what we considered "more sport": the actors held up signs that indicated scene number and location at the start of each new scene. At the end of each scene a projection was displayed that gave historical context about the moment in the play that had just happened. For example, after the

² Brecht, Bertolt, and John Willett. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1992.

scene in which Ui and the members of the Cauliflower Trust discuss the financial problems at hand and Dogsborough refuses to entertain the idea of meeting with Ui, the projection read: “Fall 1931. Nazi party faces financial ruin and disintegration. Hitler desperate to seize power. Hindenburg refuses to see him.”³ I decided, of course, that these projections should come from a medium with which Arturo Ui would be well-versed: Twitter. Each projection came up as a tweet. Additionally, some of the characters “tweeted” throughout the play to add an additional layer of satire. When each of the “historical tweets” came up presenting the parallel between Hitler and Ui, a different cast member would step forward to read the same text. We didn’t have enough actors who spoke other languages, so a few pieces of text were read in English, but for the most part the text was read by actors speaking German, Spanish, Latin, and Russian.

Additional moments that were important in subverting the expectations of the audience were: actors taking on other roles to point to the fact that they were actors putting on a play, taking props into the audience and hold them up to the lighting instruments (as an “actor gobo”), creating various foley effects, polling the audience to see who they thought would win an argument. These and other moments were meant to disrupt “the theatre-going experience and thereby provoking critical thought.”⁴ Everything I have just described felt like it answered

Brecht when he said:

In its works, the new school of play-writing lays down that the epic theatre is the theatrical style of our time. To expound the principles of the epic theatre in a few catch-phrases is not possible. They still mostly need to be worked out in detail, and include representation by the actor, stage technique, dramaturgy, stage music, use of the film, and so on. The essential point of the epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator’s reason. Instead of sharing an experience the spectator

³ Brecht, Bertolt, and Jennifer Wise. *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*. London: Methuen Drama, 2013.

⁴ Westgate, J. Chris, ed. Brecht, Broadway and United States Theater. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007. Accessed February, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central.

must come to grips with things. At the same time it would be quite wrong to try and deny emotion to this kind of theatre.⁵

However, this same statement left me feeling like I had a quagmire on my hands—in asking the spectator to come to grips with this, I had given them an experience—an experience in which they became immersed!

Most of the audience that came to see the show were from the campus, a liberal-leaning student body. While some of them appeared to feel validated in the comparisons they felt were being made between Arturo Ui, Hitler, and Trump, I wonder how useful this piece was as a call to action for students who are already activists in the practice of organizing for social change and who are constantly fighting for members of marginalized communities. In the same vein, when Brecht was working in Germany, the audience didn't have access to news and the media in the same ways that we do. When they sat down to a piece of theatre that was didactic, they hadn't just seen 30 Facebook memes on the same subject or argued with someone on Reddit about the same sociopolitical issues. The theatre was one of the few places that audiences could gather to experience and question these things (outside of university settings, of course). Our audiences today are so inundated with these sociopolitical conversations that, chances are, they're coming to the theatre with opinions that have been formed, challenged, and formed again. Fredric Jameson, recognizing the "contextual specificity of Brechtian theatre" also questions "Is there not something itself profoundly unBrechtian in the attempt to reinvent and revive some 'Brecht for our times?'"⁶

⁵ Brecht, Bertolt, and John Willett. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1992.

⁶ Westgate, J. Chris, ed. Brecht, Broadway and United States Theater. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007. Accessed February, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central.

As I explained this problem to a German professor on campus, he shared with me one of the most interesting tidbits of research I had heard relating to Brecht—that in the 1960s, a younger generation tried to break with Brecht’s didactic element as they felt like his own approach had become thoroughly bourgeois!

The more I thought about this, the more it made sense to me that German audiences would come to rebel against Brecht and Epic Theatre, and the audiences I saw in Wisconsin would become immersed in the world our production had created. As directors, we are taught that you can teach an audience how to watch a show. Audiences are quick studies, when effectively introduced to a new theatrical world. When they catch on to how that show is “supposed” to be watched, they find other ways to become immersed by it. It is my theory that our ability to find a way into various theatrical experiences has a lot to do with how we’ve been trained to consume media. Brecht made it clear in Germany that the spectator was supposed to “stand outside” the play, make decisions about what was happening, and then do something about it.

At first, the techniques he used to do this had a shock and awe effect on the audience. But it soon became commonplace. The very elements that had distanced them from the story soon enthralled them, and they went along for the ride that the production took them on. Now, with audiences consuming more media (and faster) than ever before, the adjustment period seems to be shorter and shorter. As I watched the audiences watch my production of *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, the things I had done to distance them from the story seemed to almost draw them in more. Several audience members let me know that getting to talk to actors in the pre-show made them more excited to root for those actors’ characters in the play.

They also said it was easy to ignore the actors changing in and out of costumes and thus “becoming other characters” onstage, and it was similarly easy to disregard the audience members sitting onstage as they became part of the scenic design. Still others told me that the modern music in the scene changes, meant to cause cognitive dissonance about time and place, made them feel more “into” the piece. Someone said (and I quote), “Taylor Swift and gangsters? What’s not to love?” The moments where the conventions of theatre were exposed to remind the audience that this story is a play and the actors merely players didn’t seem to have any visible effect on the audience. When I asked someone in the lobby what they thought of the transitions they said, “Oh, those? We’re not supposed to pay attention to those. So I didn’t.”

According to the 2018 Nielsen Total Audience Report, “In fact, American adults spend over 11 hours per day listening to, watching, reading or generally interacting with media.”⁷ As we can imagine, this is in direct opposition with how Brecht’s audiences experienced the world. The implications of this are vast. It left me feeling like the two hours audiences spent in the house experiencing the varied tropes of Epic Theatre could not possibly stand out when they are constantly bombarded by information and media in different forms. The elements meant to specifically draw their attention in *Arturo Ui* ended up being not much more than just another bit of media consumption that day.

⁷ Nielson Holdings. “Time Flies: U.S. Adults Now Spend Nearly Half a Day Interacting with Media.” What People Watch, Listen To and Buy. July 31, 2018. Accessed March 1, 2019. <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2018/time-flies-us-adults-now-spend-nearly-half-a-day-interacting-with-media.html>.

Once Brecht had influenced the German theatre scene, audiences expected to learn something at the theatre. After *Arturo Ui*, a student in the audience asked me what they were supposed to learn. I asked them why they thought they were to have learned something from the performance. Their response: “It’s Brecht—you’re supposed to come into it wanting to learn something.” When I asked them if they felt that way about musical theatre (for instance, the show that I just directed, *[title of show]*). They responded that the purpose of musical theatre is entirely different—it’s for entertainment. The way this student viewed the “supposed to” of a Brecht piece vs a musical theatre piece appeared to be deeply ingrained. In this instance, the student felt the expectation placed on them as an audience member was clear. Maybe that’s what *Arturo Ui* has always been—a philosophical learning experience rather than an immediate call to political action. Given that this play wasn’t produced until after Hitler’s death (and Brecht’s as well), audiences were left with a call to action several years too late. Considering also Brecht’s own political track record (“his evasion of military service, his exile and his 1947 flight from the US”⁸) one could certainly call Brecht’s own activism philosophical rather than active.

Even if my audience didn’t leave the theatre feeling the call to action that Brecht and I both would have liked, I do know that my actors were transformed by the experience. They felt that this story was an important one to tell, even if it was a cautionary tale for a world that had already decided not to heed caution. Having a gender non-conforming Arturo Ui was extremely powerful for them and for the rest of the cast, as were our conversations on the performativity

⁸ Westgate, J. Chris, ed. Brecht, Broadway and United States Theater. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007. Accessed February, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central.

of gender regarding these powerful men. Watching students who identify as non-binary or as women explore the (often toxic) masculinity of the characters they were playing was another paper in and of itself. We read Judith Butler, who said that gender is

a stylized repetition of acts . . . which are internally discontinuous . . . [so that] the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.⁹

Students expressed discomfort and delight when they discovered the joys of man-spreading and taking up as much space as possible on the stage. We explored what it meant to be a playing white, able-bodied “business men” and examined the privileges that accompanied those intersections of identity.

At the beginning of this process, I decided that I wanted to direct *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* with as many elements of Epic Theatre as the production would allow. I was successful in what I set out to accomplish. However, in evaluating the production once it had concluded, what I had done was not as effective as I had wanted. Most of these techniques did not serve their intended function. Audience members were drawn into the play in moments that had been meant to distance them from it. Looking more closely at my audience and the audience of Brecht’s time, I realized that context is everything. As Dominic Symonds wrote in “The Resistible Rise of Jerry Springer: How an Opera Revived the Polemical Stage”: “Brecht’s legacy. . . is to have made theatre valuable by giving plays a political function through a

⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 179.

concomitant revisioning of theatrical form.”¹⁰ I certainly didn’t re-envision a theatrical form when I revisited the form that Brecht imagined in his lifetime.

So, what would I do differently? How can I re-envision an Epic Theatre for 21st century audiences while still honoring Brecht’s intentions? Brecht wanted audiences to be alienated from the world of the play so that they could draw their own conclusions. I would argue that, when I directed *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* in 2017, and now in 2019, alienation is not the answer to promote critical thinking. In modern times, people are constantly evaluating the media that is in front of them, and are in the habit of drawing conclusions based on it. Utilizing that technology and immersing them in the world of the play in a way that provides them with space to make decisions, cast judgements, change their minds, and come to their own conclusions is what I believe the answer to be. Offering an immersive experience into the world of the play through technology may be a more effective way of accomplishing, in the 21st century, what Brecht had previously been able to do with Epic Theatre as we know it. Like . . . having audiences engage in the subject matter through getting tweets from Arturo Ui on their phone and being able to respond to them. Or responding to a Facebook poll about the fight Giri and Givola are having so that they can pick sides and voice their opinions. During intermission, they can scan QR codes for articles that relate the shows material back to the current political situation and read them on their phone. During this time, they could also spend some time with the cast to talk to them (as their characters) and encourage them to carry on strongly in the direction they are going, or urge the characters to change paths.

¹⁰ Westgate, J. Chris, ed. Brecht, Broadway and United States Theater. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007. Accessed February, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Brecht wanted to alienate his audience because he saw that the immersion that was happening wasn't leading to change. In directing *Arturo Ui* with Epic Theatre elements, I tried to alienate my audience and it didn't work. My realization is—if the audience really wants to be immersed, immerse them fully and then give them opportunities to plot out their critical thought along the way. Brecht's opposition to immersive theatre was rooted in rejecting *mindless* immersion for the sake of entertainment. My new goal is *critical* immersion—which is not to say I oppose or disagree with Brecht's goals, but I've realized, I need (and have) different methods to accomplish them.





Photo Credit: Edward Otto
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