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Department of Theatre and Drama

Theatre Review: Indiana University Department of Theatre and Drama presents "The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui"

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By Anne Kneller | Friday, December 1, 2017



MFA Glynnis Kunkel-Ruiz in IU Theatre's "The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui"

There is one show in Bloomington that you should see in the coming week, and no, it has little to do with cracking nuts or sugar plums a-prancing. The IU Theatre Department's production of Bertolt Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* is a timely reminder that authoritarianism, much like Jason Voorhees, never fully dies.

An electric ensemble of women performers (and two very talented men) skillfully navigate the play's alternations in tone from comedic farce, to social critique to gangster origin story. Which is to say, the play both is and is not about Chicago gangster Arturo Ui's rise from ridiculed ruffian to homicidal populist demagogue via his scheme to create a market monopoly on cauliflower. And yes, I did say cauliflower.

Arturo Ui is the story of Ui's rise to power in that it fits very well within the genre of gangster films tv shows, and novels such as *White Heat* with James Cagney, *Little Caesar* with Edward G. Robsinson, the *Godfather* saga and more recently, *Boardwalk Empire*. Narratives in this genre usually trace the meteoric rise of gangsters from their early childhood in poverty to the apex of their power as neighborhood "bosses" and then to their nadir as "Johnny Law" catches up with them. However, it would be reductive to term Arturo Ui a mere addition to this genre as it was written by noted critic of the Third Reich, Bertolt Brecht, who expressly had the National Socialist Party in mind when he authored it. Brecht's characters correspond to many of the members of Adolf Hitler's inner circle and many scholars have noted that the play's narrative arc mirrors the transition of Germany from Weimar Republic to NAZI controlled Deutschland. The play is also divided into 13 sections which parallel Umberto Eco's principals of Ur-Fascism. These are projected above the scene taking place with text that provides meta-commentary on the action.

The choice to stage this play was timely, yet its message can easily be oversimplified if viewed purely as a morality tale about the dangers of National Socialism. Well aware of this, director Liam Castellan seeks to push audiences past cursory readings of Brecht's work, and he does so by pointing to the ways in which contemporary uses of the phrase "NAZI Germany" often serve as a means of deflecting attention from our own inaction in the face of

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dehumanization, all of which are rooted in a system that prioritizes the acquisition of capital over the well-being of people.

I told you, it's a production that packs a heavy right hook.

Not only is the direction superb, its cast breathes fresh life into what could easily have become a play with a markedly masculinist bent. The choice to cast mostly women actors in the play is a bold one, and one which also allows for considerations of the roles that women have played in supporting and suborning authoritarianism and violence. In this manner, Castellán also undermines the masculinism inherent in the rhetoric which authoritarian, racist and patriarchal institutions use to incite the public to "abandon femininity" for the sake of the fatherland. As critical as it is to have a cast of women actors, I am loathe to tokenize a group of women performers solely for their gender as the performances given by many of these young actors are truly sublime. This is Glynnis Kunkel-Ruiz's debut and she was absolutely magnetic: as Ui she alternates between a frenetic energy and a stone-cold narcissism with the deftness and attention to detail of a mature performer. She has an extremely difficult role in that she is playing a character who learns how to play a character in the realm of politics, and her accent, her gestures, her expressions are pitch perfect for Ui's role as petty dictator over a cart of vegetables. After this truly fantastic performance, I look forward to seeing Kunkel-Ruiz more on the Wells-Metz Theatre stage.

Mia Siffin's performance as the very drunk acting coach was an absolute scene-stealer. The woman served us some genuine holiday ham in her hilarious scene where she "teaches" Ui how to walk (the goose-step), sit and stand in public. Siffin's scenery-chewing and wild blocking during her Antony monologue is uproariously funny and also perfectly aligned with Brecht's critiques of the emphasis on the pure emulation of effete acting styles in early twentieth-century theatre. Also notable is Katie Swaney as Clark, who undoubtedly gives one of the best character acting performances I've seen this semester. Swaney swaggers across the scenery with the metered braggadocio of James Cagney, and she has the accent and flawless line delivery to boot.

Another standout performance you'll enjoy is Courtney Reid Harris as the MC and Dockdaisy. Harris is riveting from the first moment she steps on stage as ringleader of the authoritarian circus till the last line of the play. She and Carina Lastimosa Salazar demonstrate a clear skill at creating believable characters. These two performers are powerhouses when it comes to alternating between modes of performance and accents.

Lastly, but certainly not least, the two gentlemen of Ui are riveting to watch onstage in their own right. Nathaniel Kohlmeier's Giri has crafted a truly intimidating psychopath who is by turns charming and violently enraged, and several notches up on the sociopathic scale from Mac in *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. And Dom Pagliaro carries himself like a quieter version of an (armed) club bouncer who has a baritone voice sure to charm even the most fickle of ears. Kudos gents.

All of these wonderful performances were made possible by a theatre department which endeavors to take risks, to stage plays that critically interrogate the world we live in and to provide opportunities for young actors, technicians and directorial staff to flex their creative muscle. More than ever, we need strong theatre and arts programs that afford students the ability to grapple with the world they live in and to respond to our social realities. Arturo Ui, like Umberto Eco's principals of Ur-Fascism demands that we examine the ways in which a society that is supposedly based in the "will of the people" can slip easily into an authoritarian regime maintained through nepotism, destabilization and violence. With such biting lines as "what counts is what the little hick imagines the boss acts like", Brecht points to the constructedness of the politician's image, underscoring the performative nature of politics, and the destructive power of internalized classism and political chauvinism.

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