

THE RESISTIBLE RISE OF ARTURO UI, BRECHT’S ADAPTATION OF RICHARD III

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Abstract

The Shakespearean plays have been the source of a complex and constant process of adaptation, meaning a transposition into another historical, ideological or social context, leading to a transformation of the original text. Bertolt Brecht’s adaptation is a new version of the Shakespearean Richard III, recreated for a new public, who is willing to participate in the fight against the rise to power of a vicious character and not to tolerate the imminence of a cruel fate. This change of focus is the key to the understanding of any kind of adaptation: literary, theatrical or cinema.

Key words: adaptation, spectator, originality, film

Shakespeare’s works have been remade and recreated in the context of various historical backgrounds, as in the case of Bertolt Brecht’s adaptation *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*. The German writer showed interest not only for the Shakespearean plays, but also for Marxism, as he was living the real nightmare of a Nazi Germany. In 1933, after the night of the Reichstag fire, he fled this country, with the inspiration of a play depicting the rise to power of vicious and violent leaders incarnated either by kings such as Richard III or by dictators, statesmen, politicians such as Hitler. Brecht’s real purpose is to destroy the romantic view on history and together with it the aura of importance surrounding the type of characters we have just mentioned. This way, the play develops a complex plot centered on two villain characters coming from two different historical and social frames, Richard III, a Renaissance anti-hero and Hitler, the leader of fascism in Europe during World War II. Both can be identified in the play with Arturo Ui, the main character sketched by Brecht.

Actually, the author envisioned a version of the play only for America, as he guessed that the German public was not prepared to face the irony and the derision of the fascist leader. However, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* was not at first performed for its intended American public and was produced in 1960 by the Berliner Ensemble. Only much later it has also been mounted by the Royal National Theatre in London in 1991. The specific feature of Brecht’s theatre is the epic style, as the writer himself stated. This kind of theatre clearly distinguishes from the traditional, “aristotelian” one. Unlike the latter, the epic theatre emphasizes the audience’s rational ability of observation, its analytic sense, not the spectator’s sensitivity. It proceeds by argument and objectivity rather than suggestion and subjectivity. In this context, the human being is guided by thought, flexible

and subdued to alteration throughout life, not fixed, at the mercy of an insurmountable fate. This background allows an approach between the Shakespearean theatre and Brecht's work: "Both expose the theatrical reality behind the representational illusion. Both proceed episodically through a large number of scenes. Both portray a broad swath of society – plays by Shakespeare and Brecht have equally large numbers of characters. Both present events from history and engage with questions of historical causation." [1] Another aspect which relates the two is Brecht's interest in Shakespearean ambiguities: "There's nothing more stupid than to perform Shakespeare so that he's clear. He's by his very nature unclear. He's pure material." [2] Starting with this point, Brecht tries to adapt the original play focusing on clarity and trying to annihilate the ambiguity. His play opens with a prologue which sustains this idea. It addresses directly the audience, presenting the characters and explaining the plot, stressing the message and not the suspense of what happens next. From this point of view, Brecht's play gains a didactic value:

” THE ANNOUNCER Friends, tonight we're going to show –
Pipe down, you boys in the back row!
And, lady, your hat is in the way! –
The great historical gangster play
Containing, for the first time, as you'll see
The truth about the scandalous dock subsidy.
Further we give you, for your betterment
Dogsborough's confession and testament.
Arturo Ui's rise while the stock market fell.
The notorious warehouse fire trial. What a sell!
The Dullfeet murder! Justice in a coma!
Gang warfare: the killing of Ernesto Roma!
All culminating in our stunning last tableau:
Gangsters take over the town of Cicero!" [3]

Brecht uses the Chicago setting populated by underworld characters in several of his plays, with the purpose to create a sense of the exotic and fantastic world, establishing a comforting distance between the audience and the characters. He clearly alludes to Shakespeare from the very beginning:

“ARTURO UI steps before the curtain and walks out along the footlights
Doesn't he make you think of Richard the Third?
Has anybody ever heard
Of blood so ghoulishly and lavishly shed
Since wars were fought for roses white and red?
In view of this the management
Has spared no cost in its intent
To picture his spectacularly vile
Manoeuvres in the greatest style.
But everything you'll see tonight is true.
Nothing's invented, nothing's new.
Or made to order just for you.
The gangster play that we present

Is known to the whole continent.”[4]

The author informs the reader or the spectator about the veridical quality of the play: every character has direct counterparts in real life and every scene showing an event can be connected with a real event. For instance Goodwill and Gaffles, two members of the city council can be compared to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from *Hamlet* or the large scenes in which Ui demonstrates his skills at rhetorical oration seem directly lifted from *Julius Caesar*.

Going back to the resemblance of the play to Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, Brecht’s play concludes with a direct call for action after having presented an insurmountable situation. The spectators are bound to reflect upon the possibility of a concerted effort that could help solving the situation:

“Therefore learn how to see and not to gape.
To act instead of talking all day long.
The world was almost won by such an ape!
The nations put him where his king belong.
But don’t rejoice too soon at your escape –
The womb he crawled from still is gong strong.”[5]

In the other case, *Richard III* seems to end in a spirit of destiny inevitability, as if fate would impose the evolution of events without giving the human force a clear opportunity to defeat the evil power. In his characteristic style, Shakespeare keeps a touch of ambiguity regarding the human relation to cosmic forces:

“Abate the edge of traitors, gracious Lord,
That would reduce these bloody days again,
And make poor England weep in streams of
blood!
Let them not leave to taste this land’s increase,
That would with treason wound this fair land’s
peace!
Now civil wounds are stopp’d, peace lives again:
That she may long live here, God say amen!”[6]

There are some other implicit or explicit references to *Richard III* in *Arturo Ui*. Scene 13 can be connected to Richard’s seduction of Anne over her husband’s coffin in act 1, scene 2 and scene 14 borrows from Richard’s ghostly dream the night before the battle of Bosworth field. In general terms, both plays depict the rise to power of a vicious man. However, there are several variations, as Brecht sketches this “evolution” without pomposity, focusing on the violence and the rudeness of the process. He presents Ui’s rise to power as being controlled by human forces of abuse and dupery, and therefore “resistible”. In the end, by avoiding to suggest any fall of the villain, Brecht opens the debate on how could be prevented the success of such men in the future. This way the Shakespearean material is being transposed in a new historical and social context and interpreted from a new perspective, aiming to clarify the original message of the Renaissance play.

There are multiple examples of Brecht's play productions in the modern theatre and cinema. The part of Arturo Ui has been played by actors such as Al Pacino, Leonard Rossiter, Antony Sher or Peter Falk. Lines from the play are quoted at the end of a drama war film from 1977, *Cross of Iron*, directed by Sam Peckinpah:

“Do not rejoice in his defeat you men.

For though the world has stood up and stopped the bastard, the bitch that bore him is in heat again.”[7]

A production of the play by Jimmy Fay in 2008 is being analyzed in a theatre review appeared in *The Guardian*: “In this compelling production by Jimmy Fay, Arturo Ui and his henchmen command every second of our attention. Combining Hollywood glamour with thuggery they strut across Conor Murphy's atmospheric set – warehouses with vegetable crates and carcasses – and seem unstoppable.” According to this producer's vision the didactic play is invigorated through a satirical American landscape; an immense US flag dilutes the traditional identification between Arturo Ui and Hitler, giving the audience the opportunity to trace some other political connections. In another scene of the same production “Arturo Ui appears as a gigantic puppet presiding over a corrupt courtroom. [...] Cupping his hand behind his ear, he slowly extends his arm into the Nazi salute, and in an instant has switched from Chapelinesque clowning into the familiar goose stepping figure.”[8]

Another example is the role of Ui played by Al Pacino. The actor is showing the inner pathological Richard, reduced to the simplest animal presence, without any other mask. However the production has its comic moments: for instance when Pacino woos the local merchants to his lair with the words “Something's rotten in the state of Illinois”, a variation from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, he gets a lot of laughs from the audience. The play is like a savage cartoon with deliberate parodies of Shakespeare. At the end Pacino removes his moustache and invites the audience to “act instead of talking” as in the original play.

All in all, Brecht leads Shakespeare towards clarity, but in the same time he tries to change the focus of the Renaissance play, proving that Shakespeare has incorporated in *Richard III* a story and a vicious character which can be translated in any other social and historical context. This is why there can be no end to this ongoing adaptation and recreation of the Shakespearean drama.

References

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