

# Fresh take on Brecht's despot is irresistible

We get the leaders we deserve. So when politicians are bent, businessmen venal and low-life criminals murderous, the conditions are ripe for the rise of the lowest life of all.

Exiled German playwright Bertolt Brecht wrote his parable about the rise of Adolf Hitler when the outcome of World War II was still unclear.

The Sydney Theatre Company has revisited Brecht's work in a thrilling and chilling contemporary production that avoids the obvious or specific.

This Arturo Ui is not identified with any current despot, including one in a red baseball cap. That is its strength, for it allows us to examine the petri dish of crime, corruption and self-interest that breeds dictators, near and far.

Brecht set his satire in 1930s Chicago as a mobster muscles in on the cauliflower trade. Kip Williams' production is a tale of a city where cranes dominate the skyline, dodgy deals are done in Chinese restaurants, and crims get away with murder. Yes, it feels a lot like Sydney. And yet ...

On a largely bare set, camera operators circle throughout. The live-action projections initially feel like we are watching a film of the play rather than the play itself.

But as the piece progresses, the inventive use of cameras heightens the drama. The result is satisfyingly theatrical and filmic, as the actors balance the task of simultaneously performing for stage and screen.

## STAGE

### THE RESISTIBLE RISE OF ARTURO UI

★★★★★

Roslyn Packer Theatre, March 27  
Reviewed by **JOYCE MORGAN**

Hugo Weaving is outstanding as Ui. He is ruthless, manipulative and menacing throughout as he transforms from greasy-haired thug in a singlet to slicked-back statesman in a suit.

When Ui takes lessons from a theatre director (an arch Mitchell Butel) to give him the veneer of respectability, what begins as a hilarious piece of ham acting as he delivers Mark Antony's speech from *Julius Caesar* becomes one of the most unnerving transformations.

There is much humour in this fine translation by Tom Wright. It retains the essence of Brecht's play yet the language is Australian. A statesman-like speech is wittily undercut as the despot delivers lines from John Farnham's *The Voice*. Ah, the banality of evil.

As this production makes clear, it is not Ui's ambition alone that leads to his "triumph". Rather, a corrupt politician triggers the events that lead to his ascendancy. By the time a lone woman cries that the streets run with blood and everyone has let it happen, it is too late.

This is a large cast with many notable performances, among them Colin Moody as the brutal Roma, Peter Carroll as the politician as well as Ursula Yovich and Anita Hegh in several roles.

Brecht's epic, which asks audiences to use their heads not their hearts, is deliberately alienating and hard to pull off. But Williams' production has the goods - compelling, innovative and utterly relevant. It is irresistible.

Hugo Weaving is in outstanding form as Bertolt Brecht's despot Arturo Ui. Photo: Daniel Boud