

# WUDS' The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui at The National Student Drama Festival 2011



IATL funding report

## **Acknowledgements**

*Ui* was a large show with a long life at the University before NSDF and a huge cast. It was therefore borne along by an invaluable network of support. The Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning allowed us to rehearse for a week prior to the festival in their rooms, while the exec of Warwick University Drama Society helped us financially and practically with preparations before the festival. The support of Warwick Arts Centre was also essential and received with utter gratitude, as was of course the aid from the Lord Rootes Memorial Fund, without which this project would not have been possible.

## **Introduction**

The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui (*Ui*) was a production that was originally performed in the Warwick Arts Centre (WAC) over four nights from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> of December in 2010. We sold out all four nights at the WAC studio and had great feedback from Justin Audibert, a selector for the National Student Drama Festival.

The National Student Drama Festival, or the NSDF, is an annual event that aims to host the best twelve student productions in the country, while also providing a vast range of workshops and talks with industry leaders. Throughout the year productions by students can pay for a selector to come and see their show, receive feedback afterwards and thereby place themselves in contention for selection into the final 12. *Ui* was lucky enough to make it through to this final batch, which the company discovered in late March.

The opportunity for the company was exceptional. NSDF represents the most public, professional and competitive environment for student theatre in the country. Selection made sure that not only would we be able to glean skills, contacts and experience from leading lights within the industry, but that we would also be able to showcase our work in front of other students and in a less protected environment. It also gave us the opportunity to perform a show that we passionately enjoyed in front of four different audiences.

## **The Process of Re-rehearsal**

The first challenge along the path to NSDF11 was the re-rehearsal of a production that had lain dormant for nearly four months. *Ui* is a long, technical play with several interweaving plot lines and a mix of technically difficult verse

and direct address. It is a mish-mash of epic theatre, renaissance tragedy and modern agitprop. To make matters more complicated, our own revival of the play involved precise physical movement which was usually performed ensemble amid precisely orchestrated placement of bodies on stage. The show was large, full of spectacle and packed with props and movable set. Remembering the details of all these elements, which in their entirety ran at two hours fifteen minutes, was quite a task.

Our rehearsal period was one week of 9am-5pm days during which we re-capped all the work we'd done in December and then altered certain aspects here and there. We cut ten minutes out of the show, focusing the NSDF production down onto the plot and narrative power of the script, learning the usual lesson of re-rehearsal that is; 'the simpler the better'.

However what excited the company in the run up to NSDF11 was the knowledge that the style of grotesque, comic-book movement and design that we were re-discovering was a fresh approach to Brecht's play. Like George Orwell and Joan Littlewood, Bertolt Brecht was a man who simplified theatricality in his drama because of the turbulent and extremely dangerous political atmosphere in which the production was being performed. He did not want audiences distracted by vivid design and showy special effects; instead he wanted clear, concise political messages to be conveyed with all the power of the theatre yet with none of the superfluous trappings.

The problem therefore, when dealing with a production of Brecht in the present day, is how to deliver the same political punch while living day to day life in a far more self aware and ironic culture of media plurality and domestic luxury. The question that kept cropping up during re-rehearsal was exactly that; can this ornate, grotesque style really tie itself tightly to the pertinent voice of warning in Brecht's script...

### **Practicalities**

**Of course this question was the enjoyable challenge of the show. The far more important and frustrating challenge was the transportation of thirty people up to the seaside town of Scarborough along with a van full of set and costume.**

Though we had previously decided to camp, the actors kicked up a 'fuss' about this proposition (which in hindsight was a very fortuitous and sensible fuss).

Instead each student paid a certain amount to their own accommodation in the relatively cheap rooms that were being rented out around Scarborough. The set and costume was driven up by our technical manager Jonathan Moss. We were able to share this service with another show which had been selected from Warwick '*Five Kinds of Silence*', which made the entire process cheaper and meant that the two shows were linked in the tour. As it happens we were also both placed in the same venue when we arrived, meaning that *Five Kinds* who performed before us in the week, could give us some sage advice about the limitations of the theatre.

We didn't rehearse much while in Scarborough, aside from one quick read through on the beach in order to double check lines and re-organise certain scenes. Other than that the cast were free to enjoy the huge range of seminars and events that were being facilitated by the festival

### **NSDF11**

The largest part of NSDF, aside from seeing the other 11 selected shows, was given over to the visiting seminar leaders. These leaders included a vast number of people, all of which were heavily involved in regional, fringe and west end theatre. Joe Penhall, the writer of *Blue/Orange* which premiered at the Royal Court in 2008 gave seminars on contemporary play writing. Paul McGann, the star of '*Withnail and I*' and a renowned stage actor gave a lecture on his experience of the industry, as did companies such as Rash-dash, Paines Plough and several others. The range and variety of seminars was truly astounding and unique. Unlike every other theatre festival in the country NSDF ensures that the visitors to the festival learn through direct contact and walk away at the end of the festival with more than just debt.

The festival works on a system of rotas. When we arrived at the festival we were assigned to the 'green route' and were scheduled to see certain shows at certain times throughout the week. Of course because we were performing four times within two days, those two days were packed full with either performances or last minute rehearsals, meaning we missed shows that were performing in the same time slot as we were.

Our performances fell on the Monday and the Tuesday with a matinee and evening performance on each day. Our tech rehearsal took place from 9pm-12pm on the Sunday evening and then from 6am-12.30am on Monday morning. This meant that the production team did two sixteen hour days back to back and that our technical manager Jonathan Moss (who was also technical

manager for *Five Kinds of Silence*) had done four such days in a row. Also, to add panic to serious stress, there had been a mistake in our venue. The blocks of seating which had been assembled in the old school hall in which we were to perform were incredibly shallow. Indeed so shallow was the seating rake that anyone behind the first ten rows had a very hard time seeing anything that wasn't elevated on stage. This meant that overnight, as well as fitting up the show, we had to move the entire stage (consisting of about two tonnes of steel deck) back ten metres in order to try and help our audience see the production. This meant we had no time for a technical rehearsal or indeed a full dress rehearsal. I would list this information under limitations of the festival, but that would be a very harsh report. Theatre festivals will never be perfectly fitted because they are always makeshift and seldom suited to your production. The venue will almost always be something you are fighting against, and you will either be lucky or unlucky. We were the latter.

The performances themselves progressed in classic festival format – the first performance was slow and lethargic, the second madly rushed, the third an average mix of both, and the last was superb. The show suffered from a running time of 1 hour 45 during a festival in which every other show was only an hour long. It also suffered from an audience made of other students who were looking excitedly forward to extreme criticism.

### **The Experience of NSDF**

The experience of NSDF11 was an intense learning curve for anyone thinking of pursuing a career in the theatre industry after graduating. Aside from the stress and tiredness brought on by the practicalities listed above, there was also the experience of living alongside other students who are constantly wanting to talk theatre, and criticise it. Noises Off (or NOFF) is a small pamphlet paper published each morning at the festival with student reviews in it. These, partly because of the inexperience of those writing them and partly because of honest opinion, are very rarely positive. For us they were fairly merciless. The blend of being able to read vehement criticism of your work while at the same time remaining calm and confident in it is a peculiar skill but a completely essential one to anyone looking to produce professional theatre work; for the director, assistant director and stage manager it was one of the most important experience of the festival.

As well as such concurrent criticism by peers around you while you work and perform at the festival, there is also a panel of judges. These are experienced

theatre directors, critics, actors or actresses who give over a week of their time to see every show and then judge the allocation of a certain number of awards. This has a peculiar affect on the festival – though the awards are complimentary confidence boosters for young people and on the whole fairly and broadly awarded, they also turn the festival into something more akin to a tournament than a festival. This can, and did in our experience, turn the festival into a blood sport at certain moments.

However the professional world of theatre is a blood sport, it is ruthless, almost always unfair and often based on factors beyond one's control. The NSDF11 experience was SO invaluable not because it was an enjoyable trip to a northern town where lots of theatre students played games and gave each other compliments, but because it was a ruthless, competitive introduction to a professional world which would not be half as cushioned and caring as that of the Warwick University Campus.

However, aside from the seminars, another saving grace was the large forums which were held as open panel discussions with the cast and creative team of each show. The production members would be in the middle of the room, everyone else gathered around, and then people would be free to ask questions (via a compere in the centre of the floor). Here, where a dialogue was encouraged rather than a diatribe, the experience was more fruitful and engaging. It gave us solid criticism as well as constructive encouragement.

Added to which I would mention again how different the experience of the seminars was to the rest of the festival. The seminars were professional, cool, calm and collected. They were environments unthreatened by the competition surrounding the shows and the angst between students. This made them not only informative but hugely restful and enjoyable.

## **Personal Reflections**

*NSDF's main appeal to me was the chance to freely exchange artistic ideas in a safe environment of mutual respect and barmy enthusiasm for theatrical experimentation. Aside from the practical element of this - attending each other's productions - there were post-show talks which were often guided with quite some sensitivity and intelligence towards interesting and productive interchange.*

*It was these meetings which hold such importance, in my opinion. It is vital to the industry that young companies and potential companies, actors and writers have their enthusiasm for their artistic medium nurtured but also challenged. It is a difficult combination to ask for, and occasionally at NSDF I felt the challenge was a little strong, and those that took risks*

*found themselves rebutted a little harder than those productions which leaned more on tired theatrical motifs and provided less diversifying work, but for me this did not negate the legitimacy or importance of this festival. The competition aspect of the festival I thought was poorly managed this year, but remains necessary perhaps for providing a drive to create the best work one is capable of.*

*Many thanks for facilitating what was a truly valuable experience. I myself have worked in a company which is experiencing a lot of recent success and has its roots in a show for NSDF. I am convinced it is a vital part of the constant rejuvenation of British culture.*

*Dave Burnett - Actor*

*As the stage manager for 'The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui' the most beneficial aspect of NSDF 11 was the experience of coordinating a production across venues. We are incredibly lucky at Warwick to have pre-established facilities that cater to our theatrical needs, therefore the transfer of a production to a less established venue actually allowed me the experience of working alongside technical staff and venue managers to create the best possible space for our show. It also enabled me to further my knowledge and experience of health and safety requirements as we had to develop perimeters of our own rather than work within safety guidelines provided by such an established venue as Warwick Arts Centre. It was an opportunity for me to bridge the gap between student performance and professional theatre as I was responsible for not only the safety of the cast and crew but also for the running and timekeeping of our production where tight scheduling and overnight get in/out were a necessity. I acted as a go between for our team and the in house technical staff, again allowing me to move closer to a professional theatrical role as I mediated between the desires of our creative team and the practical realities of the venue. I, along with our team, was able to build a rapport with the staff and ensure that the run of our show was a hugely positive experience in terms of gaining invaluable professional experience. This experience has therefore been invaluable to me as I continue my theatrical career as a graduate of Warwick.*

*Megan Price – Stage Manager*

## **The Result**

'The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui' received two awards at the final awards ceremony. These were the award for best lighting design which went to lighting designer Lizzie Drapper, and the Cameron Mackintosh Award for Musicality which was awarded to Matt Wells and Hoon Young Kim, who were the two lead musicians in the production's live band.

Set designer Rosie Bristow also gained some work experience with a set designer in north London, and Immi Calderwood (actress) gained work experience with Rash-Dash at the Edinburgh Festival 2011.

Several members of the company also went on to involvement with Fat-Git Theatre, which received four and five star reviews at the Edinburgh Festival, along with an offer of adaptation from past Guardian Critic Peter Mortimer.

Tom Syms and Dave Burnett were successful in their applications to drama school later in the year. They attribute advice at NSDF seminars as one of the most helpful stepping stones to securing their place.

### **Thank You**

The entire cast and creative team behind *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* would once again like to offer their sincere thanks and gratitude to the Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning (IATL). Such opportunities are what make University life within Warwick Drama such a magical blend of professionalism and friendship.