

## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

TURANDOT, OR THE CONGRESS OF WHITEWASHERS is a political comedy, a parable on the role of the intellectual in 20th C society . Brecht's play is the fruit of 30 years of constant labour and went through various stages - there are five dramatic versions extant, a novel fragment, a collection of short stories, and sketches for a series of Tui farces.

Brecht's first mention of the Turandot theme can be found in his diary for 1922. His decision to re-work the story of the cold-hearted princess of the "Arabian Nights", who rejects all her suitors until she is conquered by the love and intellect of Prince Kalaf, stems from the debate within the German Communist Party on the role of the intellectual in the revolutionary process. Brecht's diaries of the 1920s reveal that he was "simply physically revolted" by the behaviour of the official heroes of bourgeois culture, and that he considered the majority of the left-wing intellectuals nothing but " a proletarian mimicry of the decaying middle classes".

In 1931 Brecht began work on the Tui novel which was conceived as a satire on the "producers of vain and useless books". When, in 1933, Brecht was forced into exile, he completed the first draft of the novel which dealt with the story of two boys seeking to be educated in the university of the capital and thereby learning to make their choice between the two political movements of Fascism and Communism. Confronted with the tuistic behaviour of the exiled German artists and writers and their failure to form an effective, united front against Fascism, Brecht began work on a Turandot play where the princess, representing the Weimar Republic, is conquered by the Fascist leader Ui (who in the second version becomes Gogher Gogh).

The third version of the play arose from Brecht's Hollywood experience of 1941-47 and his observations of the exiles' desperate attempts to sell their creative abilities to a reactionary movie industry. When the first atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and the Oppenheim case became known he found new incentive to continue with his Turandot play, shocked as he was by the new proof of the failure of the intellectuals to use their power for the betterment of society. After his return to Europe he witnessed further signs of abuse of science in the military build-up during the Cold War, and the failure of the 'specialists' to work for a peaceful solution of the political problems of post-war Europe. This led to the last version of the play, written in 1953. Here, the Tuis are parasites, spongers and charlatans. Some resemble the East German educated elite who clamour for 'freedom' and join ranks with the better paying rulers in the West German Republic, and others are like the Stalinist bureaucrats who suppress the workers' protests on the 17th of June 1953.

In Spring 1954 Brecht started rehearsals on TURANDOT, but more urgent projects forced him to postpone the production. Before he could present a definite and final version of the play to his audiences he died in 1956, leaving the play in a semi-finished state, which has served as a basis for our production at the Glynne Wickham Studio Theatre in Bristol.

Working our way through this wealth of material we found that the problems Brecht was concerned with over a period of more than thirty years proved to be no less topical in 1980s Britain. We found that the play does not condemn intellectuals 'per se'. It rather takes a stand against elitist intellectualism and an intellectual class that relinquishes all social responsibilities. The Tuis in TURANDOT are not simply the intellectuals. Tuism rather indicates a system where thinking has been reduced to its commodity value and become a tool of exploitation in an oppressive class-system. The Tuis are high priests of a commercialized intellectual world which does not contribute to the general welfare of the people. They manipulate public opinion for their personal benefit and to the political advantage of the rulers (not dissimilar to advertising executives nowadays). The lower orders hawk their opinions on the market (cf. the journalists and the professionals in the media industry). Others form part of the court surrounding the country's ruler (the 'Think Tank'), abuse their knowledge for destructive purposes (scientists employed in the armaments industry) or are simply oblivious to political and social realities and live in their intellectual ivory towers (university lecturers, teachers, archivists, librarians etc.).

The second (Gogher Gogh) plot in the play is no less relevant to contemporary Britain, even if the face of Fascism has gone through various permutations since the fall of Hitler, Franco and the Greek Colonels. Undermining a parliamentary democracy by establishing a strong and popular leader of conservative, right-wing tendency is a threat as dangerous as ever.

That the play does not represent the revolutionary hero Kai Ho on stage is a distinct advantage in our present day political situation where it would be difficult, to say the least, to find a contemporary equivalent to this figure. Kai Ho, therefore, hints more towards a principle of popular revolt against the established order, of opposition against oppression and injustice, whether in the form of a monarchy supported by a parliament of whitewashers, or its authoritarian, right-wing variant. In the play we only see the old peasant Sen, who comes to the City to join the great brotherhood of Tuis but then learns to distrust them. In this process he is joined by numerous Tuis, especially the younger ones. They prove his point that knowledge cannot only be a pleasure, but also a useful tool; or in his own words: "The Tuis are rather like the earth. You must decide what you want to plant, barley or weeds. But you still need the earth."