



BRUTAL UTOPIAS

BY STEPHEN CARLETON



EDUCATION SUPPORT MATERIALS

Written and compiled by Stephanie Tudor

Brutal Utopias

by Stephen Carleton

Education Notes

by Stephanie Tudor



A Playlab Theatre Publication

Contents

Copyright Information	3
About the Show	4
Curriculum Connections	6
Style and Form	8
Pre-Show Activities	10
Post-Show Activities	14
Scene Excerpt 1	19
Scene Excerpt 2	23
Meet the Writer	25
Elements of Drama	29
Assessment Ideas	33



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These materials have been compiled by Playlab Theatre in conjunction with the premier production of *Brutal Utopias* by Stephen Carleton.



About the Show

1971. The height of the Cold War. The Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia is opening up to Western tourism after breaking away from the Soviet Bloc. Branislav and Valentina Radovic have been compelled to design a hotel complex for the government after forging a reputation for designing ultra-modern concrete structures, triggering their lofty utopian political and architectural ideals.

Present-day. New York City. A talented Australian Geo-Engineer, Natalia Silverman, has been asked to join the team designing New York's 'Big U' – the sea wall mitigation project that will cradle Manhattan's financial district from rising sea levels. But building a sea wall around the world's iconic home of big business, is forcing her to ask herself; is she really saving New York, or just working for the bad guys?

Brutal Utopias examines the intersection between lofty ideals and realpolitik, and the search for perfection in a world that is tilting imminently toward chaos.

Estimated running time 2 x 50 Minutes, plus interval of 20 minutes

Suitability Grades 10 – 12

Warnings Contains low level coarse language and some adult themes. *Brutal Utopias* has references to war and conflict.

Themes

Climate Change

Modernisation

Family

Politics

Culture

Capitalism / Communism

Idealisation

Principles

Politics and Governance



Curriculum Links

Dramatic Form and Style

Realism
Contemporary Theatre
Contemporary Political Theatre
Theatre of a Social Comment
Non-linear

Dramatic Conventions

Multiple roles
Multiple timelines
Fluid time and place
Fourth wall
Three-dimensional characters
Subtext
Motivated action; objectives; super-objectives;
Fragmented narrative structure
Fragmented mood
Didacticism
Parallel narrative
Intertextuality
Hybridity

Cast and Creatives

PLAYWRIGHT	Stephen Carleton
DRAMATURG	Saffron Benner
DIRECTOR	Matt Scholten
DESIGNER	Bill Haycock
SOUND DESIGNER	Guy Webster
LIGHTING DESIGNER	Geoff Squires
STAGE MANAGER	Elise Baker
CAST	Kate Wilson
	Ashlee Lollback
	Michael Mandalios
	Antony Standish
	Nikhil Singh



Curriculum Connections

The curriculum connections are provided based on the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) General Drama Senior Syllabus Drama (2019 v1.1).

General Senior Syllabus

Unit 1 — Share

Students explore the importance of drama as a means to tell stories and share understandings of the human experience in a range of cultures, including those of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and/or those from the Asia-Pacific region. Students study this unit with the purposes of celebrating, documenting, empowering and informing audiences through storytelling as a dramatic form. In this unit, students develop the knowledge, understanding and skills required to make and respond to dramatic works that use a wide range of dramatic conventions to tell stories in linear and non-linear forms. (Australia. Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2019, p.26)

Inquiry questions

Unit 2:

- How does drama promote shared understandings of the human experience?
- How can we use drama to celebrate, document, empower and share understandings of the human experience?
- How can we recreate people's stories in dramatic linear and non-linear forms?
- How can people's stories be shared through making and responding to drama as ensemble and audience? (Australia. Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2019, p.27)

Unit 3 — Challenge

Students explore how drama can be used to challenge our understanding of humanity over time. Students investigate dramatic styles that are united by social commentary, and that question their world and advocate change. They engage with the purposes of educating, challenging, empowering and informing audiences. In this unit, students develop the knowledge, understanding and skills required to make and respond to dramatic works that aspire to voice the difficult questions of human conscience and challenge our understanding of humanity. (Australia. Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2019, p.34)



Inquiry questions

Unit 3:

- How can we use drama to challenge our understanding of humanity?
- How can drama help to educate, challenge and empower us to question society at this time and advocate change?
- How can we shape dramatic languages to communicate and challenge an understanding of humanity at this time?
- How can we make and respond to dramatic works to explore challenges and demands of the human experience? (Australia. Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2019, p.35)

Taken from QCAA Drama 2019 v1.1 — General Senior Syllabus

ACARA

Year 9 and 10 Band Descriptors

- **Manipulate combinations of the elements of drama to develop and convey the physical and psychological aspects of roles and characters consistent with intentions in dramatic forms and performance styles**
 - Considering viewpoints — contexts: For example — How does the drama relate to its social context in which it was created? What culturally symbolic movements are evident in this drama? What historical influences have impacted on this drama? How are global trends in drama influencing Australian drama?
- **Evaluate how the elements of drama, forms and performance styles in devised and scripted drama convey meaning and aesthetic effect**
 - Considering viewpoints — philosophies and ideologies: For example — How has drama theory been used in creating and performing this text?
 - Considering viewpoints — evaluations: For example — How successful were the actors and director in conveying the playwright's stated intent? How successfully have the design elements been incorporated into the drama?
- **Analyse a range of drama from contemporary and past times to explore differing viewpoints and enrich their drama making,**



Style and Form

Key theatrical styles, forms and their associated conventions which are evident throughout the play:

Realism

A style of drama crafted to create believable representations of life; roles and characters in Realism drama draw on real-life or life-like motivations (Australia. Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2019, p.74). This style of theatre aims to 'replicate life' onstage. This means that not only is there a focus on shaping three dimensional character portrayals but also authentic costumes, sets and props.

Theatre of a Social Comment

Theatre of a Social Comment refers to dramatic styles that are united by social commentary, and that question their world and advocate change. These texts educate, challenge, empower and entertain audiences in specific contexts. (Australia. Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2019, p.78, p.34)

Multi narrative / Fragmented narrative structure

Multi narrative is when a play contains multiple character or storylines that are each running simultaneously. Each story is linked by a place, central character or event but they each have their own central protagonist and plot. Although this storytelling device is more commonly found in film it can be used in theatre to show different perspectives, how similar events occur in different places or times or how people are connected. The production will jump between each narrative, sometimes picking up right where we left the character or at other times travelling forward in time.

Fragmented Mood

Fragmented mood is often used to distance the audience from the emotion of one character and have them instead focus on the issue or social comment being conveyed. This convention is often used by switching between scenes, time periods or events when there is a turning point or moment of heightened mood.

Fluidity Of Place And Time

Telling a story in multiple times and places requires fluid transitions between each time and place. This can be done through a character transformation, costume changes, or even through design elements such as changes in sets, lighting or mediated elements. Fluidity of place and time is not only used in multinarrative pieces but also in non-linear productions. This serves to allow multiple perspectives to be told but can also be used to distance the audience.



Multiple Characters

Actors play more than one role switching between them. This can be done as a symbol, conveying that the actor is telling the story of multiple characters who the same event or issue has had an impact on, to remind the audience that the actor is a storyteller in that moment, serving to alienate the audience and have them focus on the message or statement being made, or simply from a practical point of view. When actors change between characters they need to deliberately change their voice, gesture, stance and facial expressions to allow the audience to distinguish between roles. They also need to ensure the transitions between roles is clear. Symbolic prop and/or costume item can assist here.

Didacticism

The political or social message that the creative team aims to communicate to the audience with the purpose of encouraging them to think about and act on. Epic theatre often has a call to action for the audience. Dramatic action offers a debate with arguments for the audience — this can occur through the use of narrative events or through dialogue itself. Didacticism is achieved through the manipulation of other Epic Theatre conventions.

Classroom Links

Style and Form

- Identify examples of conventions used in *Brutal Utopias*.
- How does the use of these conventions heighten the play's narrative?
- Consider a convention that you thought has an unexpected use in the production. How was it used effectively? What impact did it have on your understanding of the meaning?
- Consider the opposing perspectives that *Brutal Utopias* draws upon. How does this change the audience's view of the social comments that the production makes?



Pre-Show Activities

Initial Questions

Discuss the title *Brutal Utopias*.

- Define what the term utopia means — encourage students to research this term further.
- What changes when you add the word brutal to this?
- Based on their understanding of the definition, what do they think the play will be about?
- Look up the Instagram page Brutal.Utopia – Concrete Dreams. What does this page make you think about? What further images or lifestyle does it provoke?
- The play's subtitle is "A Fugue for the Twenty-First Century". What is a fugue? What do you think this will mean for the forms used in the production?
- What excites you about seeing this production?
- Theatre of a Social Comment looks to comment on society and the decisions we make and provoke audience to consider or change their behaviour. Can you think of a play or movie that you have seen that has done this for you? What was the impact?
- The production has actors playing multiple roles, what do you think are some of the challenges or benefits that come with this?
- This play explores the past but also the present. Why do you think it's important for theatre to share not only stories of what is happening in our world now but also examine the past?
- Why is it important to create theatre that educates, challenges and empowers the audience?

Spectrum of Difference

Throughout *Brutal Utopias* the characters are faced with conflicts and have to decide to what is 'right'. Before seeing the production have students respond to a range of moral statements. Revisit this activity after you have seen the show. Ask students if they feel differently about any of the questions now and if so why.

Set up an invisible line across the classroom, one end disagree the other end agree. In a normal Spectrum of difference, you would ask students to stand anywhere across the line, to reflect how they agree or disagree with a statement. However, when you start this activity only allow students to agree or disagree.



- No one is innocent
- Family comes first.
- If you care about the climate you are a good person.
- If you want a job that earns a lot of money you are a bad person.
- Everyone is a product of their upbringing.
- If you are not in a job that is helping the world you are a bad person
- You are either good or evil
- If you love someone (family, friend or relationship) you need to approve of everything they do.

Discuss why students found having to pick an absolute answer difficult. Discuss the idea of beliefs and binary ideas vs fluidity.

Why do we find it difficult to think in absolutes?

What were the absolutes/ binary ideas in the questions?

Revisit the exercise allowing students to respond to the following statements by standing along the line reflecting their views on how much they agree or disagree with the statement. Encourage them to not simply stand in the middle. Ask students to justify why they are standing where they are. Students are given the opportunity to move after hearing someone else's justification.

- You should always trust your gut
- You can do what is right and still earn good money
- What is good for you is always good for the environment / the world
- You should always stand by your beliefs, no matter the consequences
- No one is innocent
- It is important to always stand up for your beliefs
- Climate change is a problem that we need to make radical changes to correct
- Big business wants to help 'fix' climate change
- Talking about issues is just as important as doing something about them
- Appearances can be deceiving
- The government always has the interests of all citizens in mind.
- If nothing changes, nothing changes
- Family comes first.
- Everyone is flawed and it's wrong to think that anyone is perfect.
- Everyone is a product of their upbringing.



Revisit this activity after you have seen the play. Ask students to consider

- What are the relationships in the play and how they have disagreements about their beliefs?
- Who thinks in black and white throughout the play? How and when is this challenged?
- What ideas presented in the play challenged you to change your ideology or belief system? Why? If this did happen how much did it shift?
- Did you move or change your response after hearing someone's justification? Why? How are our beliefs impacted or challenged by those around us?
- What happens when we are not open to being challenged about our beliefs? Where does this occur in the play? How do the characters react?

Background

Brutal Utopias is set in New York in the present day and Yugoslavia in the 1970s. Engage students in a conversation about their background knowledge about these two places and times as well as some of the major issues that are explored.

- What do you know about New York?
- What is New York famous for?
- What happened when Hurricane Sandy hit NYC?
- What do you know about Yugoslavia?
- Where was Yugoslavia located?
- Yugoslavia was a communist state for a number of years. What do you know about communism? What does that word make you think of?
- The central characters are architects. What does communist architecture look like? Have a look at the read and research information about architecture and discuss how Yugoslavia manipulates this style.
- How can architecture contribute to a better life for everyone?
- What was the Balkan War?
- What do you know about Climate Change?
- What is the Paris agreement? Why is this important?
- If we know how to stop Climate Change, why aren't we doing it?



Read and Research

Yugoslavia was a country with a tumultuous background. Founded in 1929 as a Kingdom, until World War II when it became a Socialist State, then broke apart in 1992. Read more information about this country below.

- Yugoslavia Intro: A Quick Summary <https://yugoutour.com/blog/yugoslavia-intro/>
- Yugoslavia <https://www.britannica.com/place/Yugoslavia-former-federated-nation-1929-2003>

Yugoslavia was involved in a brutal civil war which saw many atrocities and war crimes committed. In 1993 the United Nations International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia was created to investigate and punish those involved in these crimes. Read about the UN Tribunal and the atrocities that occurred during the Balkan Wars.

- <https://www.icty.org/en/about/what-former-yugoslavia/conflicts>
- <https://www.icty.org/en/about>
- <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/ethnic-cleansing.shtml>
- Hague Tribunal History: Decades Of Atrocities, Anguish, And Justice For Ex-Yugoslavia <https://www.rferl.org/a/yugoslavia-hague-tribunal-major-moments/31334488.html>

The play discusses the issues around Climate Change and some of the solutions that are being put in place. Specifically, it explored NYC's Big U project.

- Berms Aren't Enough: NYC Shifts Course on "Big U" Resilience Plan <https://dirt.asla.org/2019/06/20/first-phase-of-big-u-pivots-to-sea-walls/>
- Rebuild by Design, The Big U <https://www.asla.org/2016awards/172453.html>

Read about the Architecture in Yugoslavia and have a look at MoMA's Exhibit "Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980"

- Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980 | MoMA LIVE <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2S0bBTHu-8>
- HOW TO SEE | Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U16ku9EBvt8>
- Toward a Concrete Utopia Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980 <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3931>
- An Expert Guide through MoMA's "Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980" <https://www.archdaily.com/908777/an-expert-guide-through-momas-toward-a-concrete-utopia-architecture-in-yugoslavia-1948-nil-1980>



Design Your Own Set

Ask your students to create a scenic design for the play based on the synopsis of the text, as well as the background information and additional recourses they have researched. Encourage them to think about the dramatic meaning, time and place when conceptualising their designs. They may like to create a minimalistic symbolic set, use cinematic design, or create a more traditional set. Students are to annotate their designs justifying their choices with reference to the dramatic languages and possible performance technologies. Students may choose where this performance will be held and should design in accordance to the stage dimensions of this space.

To help with their design they can visit:

- Principles of Set Design lecture (25 mins): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JBLXCSIzQY>
- 3 ways to create a space that moves you, from a Broadway set designer | David Korins: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SU8JYKGekXo>
- Design Challenge - designing and making a set| Royal Opera House <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLw-QapkxNA>
- Working in the Theatre: Scene Design | American Theatre Wing <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXYX5YXjYaA>

Post-Show Activities

Discussion Questions

- What do you believe was the key message of the play?
- How did the actors communicate changes in scene and action?
- Try to recall the plot. What stages led to the eventual climax?
- Recall the moments of strong emotional connection. What led to these moments? Consider acting techniques as well as plot and design elements.
- What do you believe is the best aspect of *Brutal Utopias*?
- How does the staging contribute to the production? Discuss the use of props, set and costumes.
- Why is this an important story to tell?
- *Brutal Utopias* is not set in Australia but how does it still question or make a comment on Australian society? Consider the references to political movements, cultural values, discrimination, loss of culture and police brutality.
- Describe three moments in the performance where you felt strongly about a particular issue or ideal. Why was this the case?



- Throughout the play Natalia idolises her father. How does this shift throughout the play and what is the cause of this change? How did this impact you or your understanding of the dramatic meaning?
- During the play the relationship between the parallel narratives is revealed. What impact did this have on you as an audience member?
- How do the issues in the two narratives relate to each other?
- Why is it important to tell both stories?
- Predict what you think happens next for these characters.
- The play deal with very serious issues but often uses light-hearted or humorous moments. Why do you think this is the case? Support your answer with reference to the text.

Intertextual References

- What references to other work exist in this play? Why do you think that is the case?
- What references did you find difficult to connect with? What references did you connect with? Why?
- What context does the audience bring to this play?
- What references to the Australian culture and society where in the play?
- How does your own understanding of the background change the way you watch and respond to it?

Discuss the following lines from the play and what they reference. Ask them to brainstorm other examples that they remember.

- **[with a Bogart accent]** “You hadda walk into mine.”
- One of those classic clanger moments. “Did somebody say KFC?”
- Cool. Coolio. Coolio Iglesias.

Also discuss the references to key moments of time or events. Ask the students which made sense to them and which they didn't know about. Ask them to brainstorm other references.

- Big U
- Berlin Wall
- Balkan War
- The Hague
- Communism



Key Moments

As a class identify 5 key moments from the production. Break students up into smaller groups and assign them each a key moment.

1. Have students recreate this moment as series of freeze frames with no dialogue. The movements should be strong and your emotions evident to effectively convey this to the audience.
2. Students are then to add two words per freeze frame. These can be spoken to the other characters or direct address to the audience.
3. Add additional dialogue so the scene is complete.

OR

2. Have students recreate this moment as series of freeze frames with no dialogue. The movements should be strong and your emotions evident to effectively convey this to the audience.
3. Have them consider this a gallery walk through a museum. Have them add a title to each of these freeze frames to direct dramatic focus.
4. When presenting these, one actor must step out of the freeze frame and explain the title and the image, as if they were a tour guide explaining a painting.
5. Have students extend on this by turning each freeze frame into an abstract representation of that moment, focusing on the mood or character emotions portrayed, rather than the plot. Students can bring these moments to life in a movement sequence.

Timeline

Create a timeline of the play noting the different narratives. Consider where the different stories intersect and the characters that may have met. This is useful to do directly after viewing the performance, so students understand the narrative and nature of the work. Consider the experiences within the play that define each characters' journey (some of these occur before the start of the play or offstage), the comments on political or social issues throughout the production and how their actions demonstrate their belief systems or their understanding of their situation at that time.

Compare the chronological timeline of each character to the timeline of the play. How does this structure impact our understanding of the world the play is set in? Also, think about the comment that each character, each narrative is making and then the comment the play is making all together.



Character Map

Create a “map” of the main characters. This is useful to do directly after viewing the performance, so students understand the narrative and nature of the work. This can also help later when constructing a response or critique. Consider the experiences within the play that define the characters’ journey, the status shifts through the production and how their actions demonstrate their belief systems. When mapping the characters ensure you ask students to include the links across the two timelines.

Extension:

After the character map is complete ask students to identify the beliefs and ideologies of each of the central characters. Ask them to compare these to the characters they are linked with. What do they notice? What is different about their belief systems, what is shared between characters? Are the beliefs these characters display the same at the start of the play compared to at the end?

While discussing what students have identified ask them to consider the questions:

- What does it mean to be good?
- How are we influenced by those around us?

Stephen Carleton commented that to successfully create theatre that comments on society it is important, “To offer characters who are themselves conflicted and morally compromised, alongside some other characters who perhaps aren’t so much.”

Ask students to think about this statement and identify which characters they believe are conflicted or morally compromised and which aren’t.

- How did this impact their view of the character or how much they connected with them?
- Are characters that are conflicted or morally compromised more believable? Why/ why not?
- Consider the two timelines, are there more characters in one timeline that are happy to comprise on their belief system? Why do you think this is?

Key Themes

Engage students in a discussion about the key themes and concepts explored throughout the production. Ask students which themes were most obvious and what their interpretation of them was. Link this to the manipulation of the dramatic elements and the dramatic meaning.



Asking Questions

Engaging theatre should not only entertain and engage an audience but prompt them to think about the world they live in and ask questions.

Brainstorm the questions that the play leaves you with and what it made you think about.

Compare these with a partner. Add to your mind map.

Finally create a class brainstorm.

Discuss the responses considering:

- What answers you have as a class.
- What are the unanswerable questions?
- What answers differ from person to person?
- What similarities were there in people's thoughts?
- Where were there large differences?

This initial brainstorm could be completed as a connect, extend, challenge activity. See <https://pz.harvard.edu/resources/connect-extend-challenge>

Shaping Theatre

After viewing *Brutal Utopias*, take a key moment that impacted you and use it as inspiration for a new performance manipulating the convention present within that key moment.

Consider the inquiry questions from Unit 3: Challenge “How can we use drama to challenge our understanding of humanity?” as well as Stephen Carleton’s comment “... I also expect the art I consume to address the world’s most pressing questions, and to reflect the world around us with urgency, intelligence and imagination.”

In 5 minutes, brainstorm

- What it means to be human.
- What we need to question in society at this time?
- What is an issue that needs to be advocated for?
- What you think needs to be talked about more, in your community, in your school, in your country
- What is the most pressing question you have about the world?
- What needs to be discussed with urgency and intelligence?
- What problem needs further consideration or imagination to be fixed?



After you have your brainstorm go through what you have written and highlight commonalities. Do you see any trends emerging? If not think about what stands out on the list?

Alternatively, swap your list with someone else and highlight key ideas that stand out to you from their list.

Use the key ideas to begin to consider a new piece of theatre that:

- Creates a shared understanding of the human experience
- Shares, celebrates, documents, empowers or informs audiences

Consider how you may explore this issue in a new context:

- An outline of the theme / issue to explore.
- Brainstorm dramatic conventions you could use.
- The dramatic meaning you want to convey to your audience.

Workshop these.

You may then want to:

- Write key dialogue that represents your idea.
- Create a storyboard with moments of key action.
- Continue to workshop these in the class to create a short scene.

Scene Excerpt 1

NATALIA and IKE on the East Side.

- NATALIA The flooding came all the way through here?
- IKE Uh huh. And across the river at Brooklyn. Complete inundation here all the way down to the end of the park. Power blackouts. Elevators down. Subway inundation. Looting, curfews ... The lot.
- NATALIA Wow. They really copped the full brunt of the storm here.
- IKE ‘Copped’?
- NATALIA What? You don’t say that?
- IKE Are you an Irish person?



- NATALIA You don't say 'copped'? What do you say? They bore the full brunt?
- IKE We say they got smashed.
- NATALIA It was a 1 in 500 year super storm, right?
- IKE Revised down to a 1 in 100 year event.
- NATALIA Throw sea level rise into the mix, and you've got to plan for this happening every 10, 20 years.
- IKE Correct.
- NATALIA Less, if New Orleans is anything to go by. It's a great park. Sports fields, trees ...
- IKE High community use. There were slums here before. They got landfilled to build the park.
- NATALIA And on the other side of this park ...
- IKE Public housing. China Town.
- NATALIA So retractable walls to keep the ocean out of the Fin District back there; prepare for regular inundation here by building some berms around the edges of the park.
- IKE I guess.
- NATALIA It's not enough.
- IKE What?
- NATALIA Berms aren't going to be enough here to stop the water. You've got 2 and a half feet of sea level rise as a conservative estimate for 2050. Let's assume your goals for 2050 are met: a two or three-degree temperature rise. You need to raise the whole park by — oh, let me do the imperial conversion in my head — at least 10 feet. Storm surge plus sea level rise equals ...



NATALIA They're dying. This park is already effectively underwater.
You just can't see it.

IKE You're right. I cannot. [*the conversation has run out of
puff. Checks his watch.*]

Classroom Links

Performance

- In groups read the scene aloud.
- Try out extreme possibilities as actors might do during rehearsals such as one actor not moving and one continually moving, using extremes of volumes or emotions etc.
- Go through the scene twice, trying out two contrasting sets of desires/movement/intentions and share their work.
- How do the circumstances and surroundings affect what is being said? Does the audience pick up on different agendas or attitudes when the surroundings change?
- This scene sets up the relationships for the rest of the play. Consider how to best convey these through movement and dialogue.
- Layer in the identified conventions. How does this change the meaning of the scene?
- Play the scene using a heightened or vaudeville style vs Realism conventions. How does this change the meaning?



Scene Excerpt 2

- LASZLO A new direction. I'm sure your Indonesian project will succeed wildly, but if it doesn't ... Well, even perhaps if it does. The world economy — there's talk of oil shortages. Inflation, unemployment. In the west. Flow on effects here ...
- BRAN We know the country's in economic trouble, Laszlo.
- LASZLO So to attract the money from Western Europe, from the Middle East ...
- BRAN You want us to find oil?
- LASZLO We want you to build a casino.
- A silence.*
- BRAN No. Absolutely not.
- VALENTINA On Krk?
- BRAN A shrine — Instead of war memorials, you want us to build a shrine to western capitalism!?
- LASZLO Hey — everybody gambles. Not just capitalists. The Chinese ...
- BRAN You want us to turn Krk into Macau? Or Hong Kong?
- LASZLO Just one casino, not a whole island of them! It's to be tasteful. Glamorous. Modern.
- BRAN They're not even legal here. Yugoslavian citizens are banned from —
- LASZLO It'll just be for foreign tourists.
- BRAN What?
- LASZLO The gaming rooms. Anyone can stay in the hotel. The bars, the restaurants ...



- BRAN Wait: let me see if I understand this correctly. Not only do you want us to design a shrine to western decadence, you want us to design an apartheid complex!? One in which our own citizens are not even welcome?
- LASZLO Well, it sounds terrible when you put it like that ...
- BRAN No. Niet. Ne. Nein.
- LASZLO Valentina, what do you think?
- BRAN We both say no.
- VALENTINA I can speak for myself, Bran.
- BRAN And you say no. Right?
- VALENTINA Well ... Laszlo, you say the president himself is behind this idea?
- LASZLO Yes.
- VALENTINA And that he's personally nominated us to tender the designs?
- LASZLO That's right.
- BRAN Oh, come on. You told him who you wanted working on it. He wouldn't know an architect from a dairy maid.
- VALENTINA This is a great honour. We have a patriotic duty to at least consider it ...
- BRAN And if Tito asked us to design modernist bomb shells, would we have a patriotic duty to consider that too!?
- VALENTINA This is hardly an act of war, Bran.
- BRAN I think it is. Cultural war!
- LASZLO Don't be so histrionic.
- VALENTINA Why don't we take Laszlo up on his suggestion of a few days' rest on the island?



Classroom Links

Directing

Imagine you are directing *Brutal Utopias* and use the script excerpt to create a vision for the production. Consider:

- The conventions used in the production.
- What message / idea you want to convey to the audience and how you will achieve this?
- The conventions and styles you would use to convey this piece. What are the differences in having actors play multiple characters? How would the scene be different if using realism conventions versus Epic Theatre or movement conventions? Experiment with a range of conventions and styles.
- Block your scene with other students, however, experiment with objectives, motivations and subtext for the characters. Which one more closely matches your initial vision and interpretation, and why?

Meet the Writer

Interview with Stephen Carleton

How do you begin the playwriting process?

I start by bowerbirding images and characters and ideas and lines of dialogue in a scrap book — in a journal. I usually get a sense of the topic here — the themes of the play I want to explore — and it starts to synthesise and come to life once I find the characters and their voices. Natalia came through first for this one. She claimed it as her journey by appearing first, I think.

What inspired you to write this play? Why this play? Why now?

Well, it's been sitting with me ever since I attended an exhibition on Yugoslavian architecture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2018. I was there doing research for other things, and became aware of the Big U project at the same time — the civic engineering project that Natalia is working on in the play. I was talking with a friend who was working in that space, on green architectural projects in NYC. I fell in love with the architecture in Yugoslavia at MoMA; I found out about the Big U, and somehow subconsciously, those two projects merged in my mind.

Why NYC and Yugoslavia? What are the similarities there?

Good question. Aside from the happenstance of me becoming aware of them both in New York on the same trip, there was a subconscious connection



between them that I've been trying to make explicit in the writing process — in conversation with my dramaturgical team — Saffron Benner and Ian Lawson — and in conversation with anyone who has asked me what I'm working on over the past 12 months! Both of them are projects, in my mind, about civic design and trying to use human ingenuity and imagination to build something new and 'perfect'. Both have a terrible human crisis haunting them — the Balkan War that would rip Yugoslavia apart 20 years after the period we're looking at in the play, and the climate crisis — the very real prospect of New York being submerged and made unliveable — if flooding mitigation doesn't occur.

***Brutal Utopias* is described as a work that explores the “search for perfection in a world that is tilting imminently toward chaos.” Do you believe this is what we are all standing on the edge of right now? Do you hope this play is a call to action for the audience members?**

Yes, I do think we're standing on that global climate precipice — just as Yugoslavia was standing on the precipice of being ripped apart and self-destructing during Tito's reign, or once he stood down or died. Unlike many Yugoslavians, who couldn't have predicted the future with complete confidence, I guess, we have this foreknowledge that we're bringing about our own undoing — globally, as a species — if we don't take swift action to curtail greenhouse gas emissions. I don't know if the play is a call to action so much as a call to examine where we stand as human beings in the whole climate debate, and to examine our own ethics and principles. Natalia is possibly a more principled person than I am: she's working on frontline projects with people directly affected by rising sea levels and storm surge. She can make things that help people adapt to the changes taking place. But she'd rather she didn't have to and that we act collectively and fix the problem. I can't build anything as a playwright to help save people from the effects of climate change. And I'm certainly not interested in nagging or proselytising about the problem. All I can do is paint a word portrait of a situation, present some ethical dilemmas in dramatic form, and pose questions that engage with the situation. Plays are about asking questions, I think. Science is there to provide answers. Politicians and big business are the ones tasked with implementing solutions. I am astonished that this crisis continues to preoccupy and divide us as a nation, even though consistent polling shows that the overwhelming majority of us want further action taken on climate change. There must be a large number of people out there who want that action taken, but keep voting in politicians who are opposed to that, for a variety of other reasons. Why do we do that? What's our capacity for self-sabotage, in that regard? Why are we so committed to bringing about our own demise? These are questions I'm asking myself all the time.



What do you see is at the heart of *Brutal Utopias*?

I think those questions I've outlined above are the ones that sit at the heart of the play. Why, when we have the brilliance, the imagination, and the resourcefulness to make, build, design and do anything we want, do we fail to do so? Why do we give permission for that to occur? What are the compromises we're prepared to live with, and what are the deal breakers and game changers for us? As individuals? I believe passionately in the need for action on climate change. I have solar panels on my roof, but I drive a fossil fuel-burning car. I try to source my food ethically, but I eat meat, and have no plans to stop doing so. We all live with 'small' hypocrisies. Some of the characters in *Brutal Utopias* are living with much larger moral hypocrisies and secrets. I guess at its heart, the play is asking us all to think about the hypocrisies and compromises we're prepared to live with, and those we're not.

Theatre of Social Comment challenges our understanding of humanity and expresses views about society. How did you highlight the important messages and social comments in the play, while ensuring that the audience still feels that they are creating meaning and not being 'preached' to?

That's another great question. I hope the audience don't feel they're being preached to. I know I hate didactic, preachy theatre. But I also expect the art I consume to address the world's most pressing questions, and to reflect the world around us with urgency, intelligence and imagination. I'm not saying that I'm achieving those things with this play, but that would be the goal: to ask questions rather than to provide answers. To offer characters who are themselves conflicted and morally compromised, alongside some other characters who perhaps aren't so much. Which are the characters we connect with and project ourselves onto? Who is the "me" character in the play for the viewer? I guess I highlight important messages by dressing them in human form, and offer a story that suggests that history always comes with crisis and challenge. Some crises we can foresee and avoid; others swoop down upon us with a sudden, reckoning force and sweep us up in their path. With climate change, we can't pretend we didn't know the crisis was coming. We're in it. It's not a future prediction anymore. So how do we live with it? How do we live with that knowledge? How do we live with ourselves, knowing that we each have a role to play in the larger drama we're all living in.

What do you see as being the role of playwrights in our society?

To ask questions. To reflect ourselves back to us, with imagination. To tell the story of who we are here and now.



This work is in a different style from your previous plays. Was that a conscious decision or did it happen organically through writing?

Yes, I normally work in black comedy and Gothic drama or theatre of the absurd. I have written other plays on this topic in those modes, but this story — this human drama — came to me in this form, in a more naturalistic voice, and demanded that the story be told in this style. Your play tells you what it is, just like your characters tell you who they are and what their voices are. I often think of playwriting as a form of shamanistic channelling in that regard. The dramaturgical process then — the redrafting process — becomes about shaping and making sense of it all, and making sure the structure supports the story you're trying to tell. I think in that sense, it's a combination of conscious decision-making and organic writing processes.

There are a lot of intertextual and contemporary references throughout the play. How much research did you have to do to create this work?

I had to do historical research into Yugoslavia during the 1960s and 1970s, and into modernist architecture and design from that period; and I had to do journalistic research into the Big U project in Manhattan. That involved talking to people who have the knowledge and the expertise that I lack. The friend who provided me with information about the Big U project is also an architect who was able to put me onto Le Corbusier and that whole European mid-century modernist movement. I think the intertextual references probably draw on knowledge I already have, exhibits I've seen, books I've read, shows I've seen. I hadn't thought of it as a play heavy with intertextual reference, actually, so that's interesting to me that that's how you see it! It suggests that a lot of that process must be subconscious. Short answer: lots of research and new knowledge being acquired here. I'm not an architect, an ecologist, or a green civic engineer! And I live in constant fear of being revealed as the complete fraud that I am.

You are the Playwright-in-Residence for Playlab Theatre. How does this change the playwriting process? What have you gained from this?

The residency provides me with the security of knowledge that the play is going to be produced — that it matters, and that it needs to be good. That provides me with the incentive to persevere through self-doubt and lack of confidence. It forces me to adhere to a writing regimen that might otherwise fall by the wayside. It also ensures that the project is scaffolded by the professionalism and the commitment to correct dramaturgical and development processes that Playlab Theatre adheres to. I'm the beneficiary of the company's professionalism and good process, and appreciate it enormously.



You said in your Playwright Diary that this play explores the question “What do we leave behind?” Can you talk more about that idea?

I think there’s a theme of legacy lying beneath the surface of the play. Most of the characters are either architects, civic engineers, or environmental scientists. They design things that outlive them. I guess you could argue that writing a play is an act or legacy and leaving something behind too. Every play is a record of the time and place in which it was written. In a metatheatrical sense, then, this particular play is asking us all to consider what we bequeath the world after we leave. In an era where carbon footprints are everything, that seems to be a good question to be asking right now.

Elements of Drama Discussion

ROLE RELATIONSHIP CHARACTER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose a specific moment of dramatic action that exemplifies one of the characters. How? Why? What dramatic meaning did this communicate to the audience? • How would you describe each character? How are their characters portrayed through the voice and movement of the actors? • How do characters change over the course of the play? • How would you describe Valentina’s relationship with Lazlo? • What has motivated Natalia to be involved in the Big U project? • Natalia’s relationship with her mother is strained. How is this communicated to the audience? • How does your understanding of the characters shift when you find out how they are all related? • How were the relationships shown through body language and movement? • How does the fugue form contribute to the understanding of the characters?
TENSION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were some of the key examples of tension during the production? • How did the tension engage you? • What were you invested in?



	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How did the changes in time and place impact the development of tension?• How did the use of the parallel narrative develop tension?• Describe moments of tension of task.• Tension of relationship is present throughout the play. What are the most obvious examples of this? Why does the tension develop?• Tension is broken through moments of humour throughout. What impact did this have on the audience?
FOCUS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Think about the moments onstage where dramatic focus shifted. What happened onstage to facilitate this change?• How were the design elements used to shift the dramatic focus?• How has dramatic focus been used to convey the characters' relationship with each other?• How has dramatic focus been used to remind the audience that the play is not only about these characters but about the wider issues that impact them?
TIME	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When is the play set?• Consider the intertextual references, how is time relevant in relation to these?• Could this play be set 5 years ago? Why/ why not?• How are the two timelines shown?
PLACE	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How is place communicated to the audience?• The play is set in multiple locations. How are these conveyed through the set?• How does the audience know they have been transported to a new place?• How is place important to the narrative?• Consider the use of place and its impact on the characters. What would happen in the play was set in another place?



SPACE	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Analyse the different ways that the stage was used throughout the production.• How did the use of the space help to convey the characters' relationship?• How did the lighting enhance the different use of the space?• Consider when there was an extreme use of space used. How did this impact you as an audience member?
MOVEMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider how relationships in the play are communicated through body language and movement. Consider how you can show a relationship without "explaining" it.• Was the movement symbolic in anyway?• How was movement contrasted by stillness? What effect did this have?• How was movement used to convey character? Think about how the actors shifted between playing multiple roles?
LANGUAGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How were words used to create power?• Consider the language used in the opening monologue. How does this set up time and place?• What was the subtext behind some of the memorable lines?• How was language used to shape character? Consider the different ways each character speaks / uses language.• Why were accents used/ not used? How did this contribute to your understanding of time and place?• There were a lot of colloquialism and intertextual references through the use of the language. What did this tell you about the time, place and character?
CONTRAST	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Describe two contrasting moments in <i>Brutal Utopias</i>. How were these moments created through sound, lighting, voice and movement?• Analyse the ways in which contrast is used throughout the play in relation to the range of moods.



	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do the two story lines contrast each other?• What other elements of contrast did you see throughout the production?• Contrast the characters at the start of the play to end. How have they changed?• How did the actors change their voice and movement to portray a range of contrasting characters?
MOOD	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discuss the impact of the sound design and music used to create specific moods. Use specific moments of dramatic action from the show and discuss how they made the audience feel.• Consider how they would've been different if different artistic choices were made, such as alternative lighting or sound.• Consider the mood at the start of the play. How does this contrast with the end of the play?• Consider a moment of intense mood. What performance techniques and skills of the actors were utilised to make you feel this way?• How do jumps between the two timelines impact the creation of mood?• How does the mood shift when Natalia finds out about her father's past?
SYMBOL	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discuss the impact of the use of symbol throughout. How did this impact your understanding of the production and the narrative?• Consider the title of the play. What do you think it means and how does it change your understanding of the play?• How is architecture used as a symbol?



Assessment Ideas

Extended Response

Task 1

After viewing *Brutal Utopias* evaluate the effectiveness of the production by analysing the **on-stage dramatic action** and how the use of the dramatic languages **created dramatic meaning**. In your response consider how the play challenges the audience to make a societal change. Explore two opposing views. Support your statements with perceptive and thorough evaluation and supporting evidence from key moments in the production. Use appropriate drama terminology throughout your essay.

Task 2

“I guess you could argue that writing a play is an act or legacy and leaving something behind too. Every play is a record of the time and place in which it was written.” Stephen Carleton

In response to the above quote, you are to write an analytical essay evaluating how the production works to examine how the play is a record of the time and place in which it was written. You are to evaluate the success of the production to challenge understandings of the human experience and how it created dramatic meaning through the manipulation of the two elements of drama and one key convention.

Task 3

“as a call to examine where we stand as human beings in the whole climate debate, and to examine our own ethics and principles.” Stephen Carleton

In response to the above quote, you are to write an analytical essay evaluating how the audience has been positioned to view ideologies presented in *Brutal Utopias*. You are to evaluate the success of the production and how it created dramatic meaning through the manipulation of the elements of character and contrast. You may want to consider the use of the use of parallel narratives in your response.

Task 4

How do key moments from *Brutal Utopias* support the meaning found in the below image? Argue a position about the manipulation of two key elements of drama and one key convention.