

From insecure stumblebum to embryonic Nazi, Antony Sher turns Brecht's fascist parable into an inventive star vehicle, argues **Michael Billington**

## The two-bit Hitler

**I**RONY of ironies: Brecht created a legendary ensemble but survives principally as a provider of star parts. Watching Di Trevi's very good revival of *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* at the Olivier, one feels it is there less because its anti-fascist theme has acquired a sudden topicality than because it provides a perfect vehicle for Antony Sher. Fifty years after the play's composition, the medium has become as important as the message.

This is not to deny Brecht's parable its nuanced vitality. Drawing on mock-heroic verse, recited in Karit Bol's new translation in tumbler pants, it famously parallels Hitler's rise to power with that of a two-bit Chicago gangster operating a protection racket. The analogies are often deft and ingenious: the Roehm murders are staged as a St Valentine's Day's massacre and the Anschluss becomes the appro-

priation of the neighbouring suburb of Cicero.

But while Brecht achieves his satirical purpose of ridiculing and belittling Hitler, his exclusively economic interpretation of the facts sidesteps the whole issue of anti-Semitism. Brecht captures Hitler's thought rapacity but not his bottomless capacity for evil.

What Ms Trevi's production conveys well, however, is the debased theatricality of fascism. In the play's most famous scene Arturo Ui is tutored in posture and rhetoric by a ham Shakespearean actor. But this production extends this into a governing metaphor. Ui's has cunningly designed a rotating stage-within-a-stage that hosts its own Albert Speer-style proscenium arch. Dominic Muldowney's score combines thunderous Wagnerian chords with fragments of popular song and, at one point, Arturo's hatchet-faced henchmen execute a macabre tap dance.

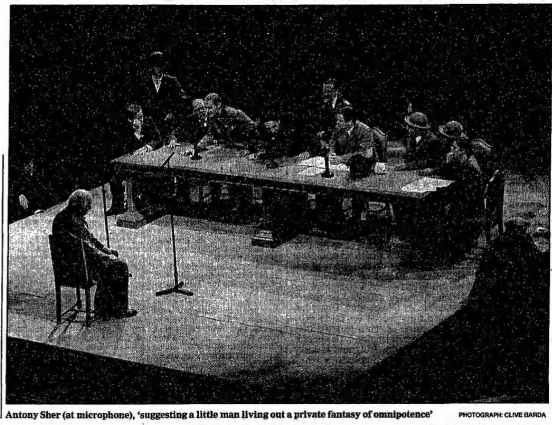
At a time when even liberal democracies are turning politics into a showbiz spectacle, this actually seems more topically chilling than the play's final warning that "Earth's womb still teems with monstrous tyrannies."

But, if one is honest, Arturo Ui survives largely as a platform for a comic prodigy; and, even if Mr Sher doesn't have quite the clarity of outline of the late Leonard Rossiter, he brings to the role a wealth of inventive detail. He suggests, above all, a little man living out a private fantasy of omnipotence. He starts as an insecure stumblebum in ill-fitting clothes seen gazing wilyly at a cauliflower as if it were York's skull. In the great scene with the Shakespearean actor, he experiments with Napoleonic gestures and Caesarian laurels before latching on to an embryonic Nazi salute at which he gazes fascinatedly in a mirror.

Having finally discovered an identity, he comes goose-stepping down the Olivier aisle and is just seen as a ranting automaton atop the proscenium arch. With great wit, Mr Sher brings out the self-mythologising aspect of fascism in a way that reminded me of Hemingway's account of seeing Mussolini earnestly studying a book which happened to be upside down. In a vast cast, Michael Bryant touchingly makes the Shakespearean Actor a sad ham in a black fedora and there are neat contributions from Anthony O'Donnell as a politician, Ernesto Roma and from Nick Holder who turns Brecht's historical projections into sung intruders.

But it is Mr Sher who finally justifies the evening. As an allegory about Hitler, the play has the strengths and limitations of a cartoon but it is one to which Mr Sher brings his own brand of unalloyed animation.

● In rep at the Olivier Theatre.



Antony Sher (at microphone), 'suggesting a little man living out a private fantasy of omnipotence'

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## Billington on Ui

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