

When Čapek's play *The White Disease* was premiered at the National Theatre in Prague, it received a 30 minute standing ovation from the audience at the end of the play. The audience interpreted it as an anti-Nazi play. But is it?

By Lauren Brooks

Context

- **Nazi Germany on the rise through the 30s**
- **1936 Hitler sent troops into the Rhineland**
- **The Munich Agreement 1938 - Neville Chamberlain and allies peace talks signed away the Sudetenland to Germany**



Anti-Nazi?

- **A war mongering dictator is letting people die**
- **Dr Galen wants peace**
- **He will only give the antidote if the war is stopped**
- **People dying - older, wealthy people - represent the germans**
- **People's lives are in the hands of a few**
- **One nation wants war they all have to go to war**
- **The dictator dies in the end as a result of his own mob**



Karel Capek's Preface

- **“One of the most distinctive features of post-war mankind is a retreat for humanity”**
- **“The individual is dependant on an autocratic and imposed system”**
- **“ideals of democracy versus the unlimited and ambitious ideals of dictatorship”**
- **“The person who represents the will to power [the Marshall] will not be stopped by compassion for human pain and terror”**
- **“Human life will pay for this with pain”**

Anti-totalitarianism

- **White disease is a metaphor for moral disease of totalitarianism and the destruction it brings**
- **Vaclav Havel - it affects the whole of society, even those who are against the regime are inevitably apart of it**
- **Most people do not have courage to step out of the system - Krugs accountant**
- **Ian Hargreaves - authoritarian regimes within themselves have seeds of destruction**
- **Heim - “Capek’s vision is a universal one and his message of active resistance universally applicable”**

Capek's previous works



- **Several previous works written in defence of democracy**
- **1937 'The First Rescue Party'**
- **1938 'The Mother'**
- **He was not awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for literature as his writings were considered too political**

A pacifist play?

- **Some argue the play is a pacifist one as Doctor Galen seeks absolute peace**

However it is not for many reasons:

- **Two conflicting forces: the doctor vs the dictator**
- **Doctor with his moral vision is willing to sacrifice people**
- **Fear is the doctors ally**
- **Capek - Galen's blackmail is wrong**

The Doctor



- **“Everyone has a right to live”**
- **Moral cause**
- **Chooses who lives based on their social class**
- **Claims he is ordinary - ordinary does not mean morally right**
- **Frantisek Cerny - fairy-tale hero**

The Dictator



- **Warmongering**
- **War is the greatest thing you can experience**
- **Does not care if people die**
- **Believes he is invincible**
- **Humanised at end**
- **His mob kills him**

Similarities of the characters

- **Carrying out the people's will**
- **Ideologically motivated**
- **Holding people's lives in their hands**
- **Ruthless in their actions**
- **End up dying when trying to bargain for what they want**



Main Theme - Fear

- **Galen fears war and power**
- **Dictator fears dying**
- **The doctors ally - needs fear for the war to be stopped**
- **What a totalitarian regime is fuelled off**
- **Context - Czechoslovakia living in fear at the time**



Conclusion:

Not anti-Nazi, but anti-totalitarianism

- **Not specifically anti-Nazi, but anti-totalitarianism and the power and fear that comes with it**
- **Anti an ideology**
- **The flaws of the doctor - he is not the hero against nazism**
- **Many works highlight his ideology**
- **He could not have known of the future, looming fear was enough**

Discussion questions

- **Do you think people were right to think it was anti-Nazi considering the political climate?**
- **Do you think the first world war influenced Capek's ideas?**
- **How much do you think it is an ideologically driven play/film?**
- **Thoughts on the doctor - do you sympathise or think he was wrong to hold lives in his hands?**
- **Do you think the dictator was too humanised at the end?**

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