

The Good Audition Guides

CONTEMPORARY  
DUOLOGUES:  
TWO MEN

*edited and introduced by*

TRILBY JAMES

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# Introduction

## ☞ WHY DUOLOGUES?

Whether you are doing theatre studies at school, taking part in a youth theatre, at drama school (perhaps in your final year and looking for showcase material), or attending a professional acting workshop, the duologue will arguably provide the most intense form of character exploration and analysis. It will draw on all the essential skills of the actor – namely playing an objective, identifying obstacles, incorporating backstory, staying in the moment and listening. It is what any Stanislavsky-based acting technique is all about, and a well-crafted duologue will allow you to put all these elements into practice.\*

The twenty-five duologues in this volume are from plays that have largely been written post-2000. With the odd exception the characters range in age from fourteen to forty. There is a wide variety of character types and styles of writing from which to choose. They are all drawn from the extensive list of new plays published by Nick Hern Books.

## ☞ CHOOSING YOUR DUOLOGUE

A good proportion of these duologues for two men are of a familial nature, some are between friends and some are of a romantic or sexual nature. Several of the duologues are ethnically or geographically specific, but the majority can be played in any accent and by any ethnicity. Similarly, out of context, some of the duologues can be played either younger or older than specified. Use your judgement and change place names or other references to suit your own purposes.

You will also find a good mix between the dramatic and the comic, the overtly political and the more playful. Some contain strong language and deal with adult themes. All

\*Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938) was a Russian theatre practitioner who developed a series of techniques in order to help the actor towards a more realistic portrayal of his character.

provide a particular challenge and represent the pressing interests of some of our leading playwrights.

### ☞ PREPARING YOUR DUOLOGUE

To understand the characters and the context in any one piece, you will need to read the whole play and to undertake all necessary research. Work with your scene partner to create detailed character histories and a backstory. Work out what it is that you want in the scene, where your characters are in agreement and where they are in conflict. Is there a power struggle? Ask yourselves what the scene is about (see below) and think about the story you wish to tell and why. The duologues in this volume concern themselves with the human condition. They explore our deepest longings, fears and needs. They pose complex questions about how we relate to each other and to the world around us. By engaging in the characters' psychology you will be able to reveal what lies at the heart of a scene.

### ☞ PERFORMING OR PRESENTING YOUR DUOLOGUE

As obvious as it may sound, remember that the playwright has written a *conversation*, so you will need to listen and to reply accordingly without preempting any outcome.

Allow yourself to be affected by what is said to you as you respond, and think about the effect you want to have on your partner. Stay in the moment and remain flexible and open to any impulses you or your partner might experience. The best kind of duologue is like an exciting tennis rally in which the audience are gripped, not knowing which way it will go. Several of the duologues in this volume are highly physical. Perhaps you will be working with a director who will have their own ideas about how to stage the scene. If you are working just the pair of you, think about how and where you will move in the space and what sort of physical dynamic there is between the characters. In some cases the writer has given a detailed

description of what happens physically. Follow their stage directions and think of it as ‘choreography’ as you would a dance. Some of the writers use forward slashes (/) to indicate when the other character interrupts with their next speech.

#### ☞ THE USE OF PROPS

Several of these duologues require the use of props. As far as you are able you will want to seek out items that are as close to the specified article/s as possible. Most actors enjoy working with props. The challenge of how to handle them during a scene, and the comic and dramatic possibilities they offer are all very much part of the actor’s craft. Be sensitive to anything that you handle on stage. Is it an item of rare or precious value? Is it something that disgusts you? Is it something that is dangerous and might frighten you? If you cannot get the ‘real’ thing, use your imagination to endow the object with all the qualities of the original.

#### ☞ TIMING/EDITING


For the most part, the duologues are the same length as they appear in the original playscript. Unless you are looking for showcase material, where you will be obliged to edit a scene to the standard one to three minutes, you will find it more useful to have the complete scene as it is written. Occasionally I have modified a duologue to make it flow more easily, and where a duologue is exceptionally long I have shortened it. In these cases, I have inserted this symbol [...] to show where a cut has been made.


#### ☞ HOW TO USE THIS BOOK


For each duologue I have provided a list of the following:


☞ WHO The characters’ names, their ages, and where they come from. In many cases, the characters can be played either younger or older than in their original context. If a character’s


accent is not native to you, you may like to try playing it in your own accent. However, watch out for duologues that have been written with a strong dialect or idiom and where the essential rhythm of the piece needs to be maintained.

 **WHERE** For the most part, this is specified in the text. However, you may prefer to change place names if you wish to transpose the scene to suit your own accent.

 **WHEN** Most of the duologues in this volume are set in the present day. Some are historical. Read the whole play to make further decisions about the time of year it is, day of the week and the time of day.

 **WHAT TO CONSIDER** This will include the style of the play, its themes and use of language, the characters' backstories and some indication about what happens next.

 **WHAT THE CHARACTER WANTS** Objectives to play. Once you have learned your scene and have done all the necessary research and preparation, the only thing you should be actively playing is the 'What do I want?' or the 'What do I have to have?'


 **WHAT THE SCENE IS ABOUT** It is important to think beyond what your character says and does to the wider implications of a scene. This will enable you to play the scene with intelligence, sensitivity and a greater understanding and awareness of what the play is trying to say.

\*

These lists are suggestions only. When you become increasingly familiar with your duologue you will find you have opinions of your own; you may even find yourself in disagreement with my notes. Use this book as a springboard from which you will form your own opinions and ideas. My notes are by no means a substitute for reading the play or for thinking for yourself about the characters and their situations; they are rather a tool intended to help, to provoke and hopefully to inspire.

# #aiww: The Arrest of Ai Weiwei

*Howard Brenton*

 **WHO** 'Sportsman', an interrogator, Chinese, and Ai Weiwei, conceptual artist, Chinese.

 **WHERE** A small narrow room in a Chinese prison.

 **WHEN** Spring 2011.

 **WHAT HAS JUST HAPPENED** On the 3rd April 2011, as he was about to board a plane for Taiwan, the world-famous Chinese artist Ai Weiwei was arrested at Beijing Airport. He was detained for a further eighty-one days, during which time he was regularly interrogated (before being released on bail, charged with tax evasion). In the following duologue, Ai Weiwei is being questioned by an official described in the play as 'Sportsman'.

 **WHAT TO CONSIDER**

- The play is based on *Hanging Man*, an account Ai Weiwei gave directly after his release from prison to British arts journalist Barnaby Martin. You may wish to read it.
- Read Howard Brenton's fascinating introduction to the play, in which he tells how he was approached to write the play at Ai Weiwei's request.
- Research the work and political activism of Ai Weiwei. Howard Brenton observes: 'So much conceptual work in the West is tediously egocentric, it is all "me me me" Ai Weiwei's work is not about himself, it is turned outwards toward other people, society and the world, it is all "us us us"': This tells us something about the generosity of the man, which you will need to capture in playing him.
- Ai Weiwei's bravery and strength of character. He has been unafraid to criticise China's oppressive regime and continues to fight for freedom of expression. The fact that he survived the eighty-one days without having been crushed is testament to his resilience.




- The 'Sportsman'. It is important that the interrogator is a fully rounded character: We may not agree with his beliefs, we may dismiss them as propaganda or indoctrination, but in playing him you will need to get behind the psyche of a man who believes that what he is doing is right, dutiful and good.
- The Sportsman is described as 'fit'. He wears jeans and a Manchester United football shirt.
- Their relationship. Brenton describes Ai Weiwei's encounters with his interrogators as a 'Stockholm syndrome in reverse': in other words, the captors become fascinated by their captive. Find the points in the duologue where the Sportsman becomes drawn to Ai Weiwei, where their debate about art or loyalty to the state is stimulating to him. You may like to play the duologue with the Sportsman really enjoying the discussion.


#### WHAT SPORTSMAN WANTS

- To break Ai Weiwei.
- To protect China and the Communist Party.
- Power.

#### WHAT AI WEIWEI WANTS

- To defend himself.
- To preserve his sanity.
- To prove to his captors that he has done nothing wrong. (Note the way in which he quotes Mao in order to further his argument.)

 **WHAT THE SCENE IS ABOUT** Indoctrination versus freedom of expression, classicism versus modernity, art and what constitutes it, suppression, domination, frustration, fear of change.

 **NB** This play offers a number of other duologues from which to choose.

SPORTSMAN. Right. Admit it.

AI WEIWEI. Admit what? [...]

SPORTSMAN. 'I admit the sunflower-seed art is a scam.'

AI WEIWEI. I don't admit that!

SPORTSMAN. Why not? Aren't you pleased with yourself?

Dumping millions of worthless seeds on London? Seeds made of clay, that can't even grow!

AI WEIWEI. It's what people make of them that matters...

SPORTSMAN. I tell you what this is, my friend. A great big fat international economic scam. A load of little bits of clay all over the floor, how can that be art?

AI WEIWEI. It's art or it's not art, I don't care.

SPORTSMAN. What? You say you are an artist and you don't care about art?

AI WEIWEI. What I care about is providing a new condition. For art.

SPORTSMAN. A new condition for you. More dollars, more euros!

AI WEIWEI. No, a new perspective, and from that angle to see something new...

SPORTSMAN. What view? What angle?

AI WEIWEI. A way of seeing the world, in a new way!

SPORTSMAN. This is gibberish.

AI WEIWEI. No.

SPORTSMAN. Prententious, arty nonsense.

AI WEIWEI. No! But it's not logical, not practical. This kind of art deals with people's lives, directly. It intervenes in life. Creativity is... is the power to reject the past, change the status quo, seek new potential...

SPORTSMAN. And how can a load of grey sunflower seeds piled up in a room do that? Art must be beautiful, what's beautiful about your crap?

AI WEIWEI. The beauty is in people...