ARE WE LIVING IN A BRAVE NEW FUTURE?
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Aldous Huxley wrote *Brave New World* in 1931 in the shadow of the first world war, the Wall Street Crash and a devastating flu virus that had claimed millions of lives. The Treaty of Versailles had carved out a new Europe, while electricity, the automobile, production lines, new mass media and aeroplanes were changing the world. England was in the grip of a depression, but science and technology promised a better future: a world where disease, drudgery and poverty might no longer exist. Very few writers were bold enough to challenge this naive optimism but in *Brave New World*, Huxley certainly did; now his work, adapted by Dawn King for the stage and premiering at Royal and Derngate, Northampton, challenges audiences to do the same.

Huxley was concerned with those who had little say in their society, who were at the mercy of an all-powerful elite. His idea of the helpless masses is still a common theme in our own popular culture – just think of The Hunger Games, Insurgent, Black Mirror, Humans, Utopia. The emergence of an elite who control the majority, who invariably are low-income consumers, is a worldwide social phenomenon; increasingly we are taught to believe that a peaceful utopian life for all is only possible in a world where dissent and real human emotions are crushed.

These are the issues which, for me, made a novel written 84 years ago stunningly relevant to our society today, and convinced me that Dawn King’s vision for adapting the book would encourage audiences to see their own world through Huxley’s eyes.

One challenge for the adaptation would be to underscore how relevant Huxley is today and how he foresaw so many of the problems afflicting 21st-century society.

He predicted, for instance, the ways in which technology, in the control of powerful elites, can control our decision-making with social media, pornography, the commercialisation of sex, advertising and reality TV. He foresaw the ubiquitous prevalence of drugs, both legal and illegal, and how pharmaceuticals such as Ritalin would sedate growing numbers of children. Genetic engineering, euthanasia, a national lottery and even corruption at the top of world sport are all a part of his nightmare future.

Our *Brave New World* eschews the futuristic landscapes, flying machines and technical wizardry that much of sci-fi is obsessed with, and focuses instead upon a human story set in a ruthless totalitarian regime.

This is a world where people think they are always happy, always get what they want, and never want what they can’t have. It is a place in which artifice rules, whether in scents, flavourings or fabrics. A world where life is created in test tubes and children are conditioned to prioritise consumerism, sexual pleasure and unswerving dedication to a World State. Here real emotion and ideals are purged, concepts such as family, religion, empathy and honour are banned and “history is bunk”.

Dawn has always believed that an adaptation of *Brave New World* must speak powerfully to a 21st-century world in which we have become enslaved by a compulsion for easy pleasure without accountability and where a banal popular culture opiates the masses. A world where, day by day, big business encourages us to sacrifice our privacy and spy on friends and families through social media. Huxley’s idea of “feely” interactive films anticipates reality TV, selfies, mass pornography and the internet voyeurism of our own time. His death centres foresaw the euthanasia clinics in modern Europe and his concerns about genetic engineering have proved terrifyingly prescient.

Huxley’s view of the future was very different from that of George Orwell, who in 1948 wrote the novel Nineteen Eighty-Four. While Orwell’s dystopia was based on oppression through fear, the earlier *Brave New World* offered a blueprint for a society controlled by enforced happiness. Huxley, who had taught Orwell at school, wrote to him on the publication of Nineteen Eighty-Four.

The lust for power can be just as completely satisfied by suggesting people into loving their servitude as by flogging Aldous Huxley.

“Whether,” he says, “the policy of the boot-on-the-face can go on indefinitely seems doubtful. My own belief is that the ruling oligarchy will find less arduous and wasteful ways of governing and satisfying its lust for power … the lust for power can be just as completely satisfied by suggesting people into loving their servitude as by flogging and kicking them into obedience … all conditioning aims at that: making people like their inescapable destiny.”
In *Brave New World*, Huxley presents a picture of a global dictatorship controlling a totalitarian, consumerist welfare state. He depicts a world in which there is no war, poverty, unemployment or crime and in which threats are rarely used or needed. Rule is by “bread and circuses” and citizens are well-off, safe, never ill and unafraid of death. They are oblivious to real human emotions and passions. They have no mothers or fathers, no wives or children – no bonds or attachments, no rejection, jealousy or hurt. Theirs is a world without religion or war, where lust and pleasure have replaced love and empathy. Huxley’s sense of infant conditioning speaks powerfully to an age in which children as young as four are addicted to iPads, glued to televisions and nurtured on fast food and artificial snacks laced with addictive chemicals. It speaks to an age in which adults interact with a tablet, laptop or smartphone rather than other human beings. Huxley describes the world he foresees as a sinister, insidious nightmare in which the inhabitants live sterile lives, subdued by the drug soma in a numbed utopia.

He considered the future “the Age of Noise. Physical noise, mental noise and the noise of desire” arguing that “all the sources of our almost miraculous technology” will be thrown together in an “assault against silence”. He talked of a technology which “penetrates the mind, filling it with a babel of distractions ... news items, mutually irrelevant bits of information, blasts of corybantic or sentimental music, continually repeated doses of drama that bring no catharsis, but merely create a craving for daily or even hourly emotional enemies”. He viewed music with suspicion but also with great respect, believing that when composed meaningfully, “after silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music”.

In all our productions at Royal and Derngate this season, music has played an important role in drawing an audience into the world of the play. Here we’ve collaborated with These New Puritans, whose original score explores the themes of science and technology in the book. It conveys the dizzying scale of Huxley’s World State and adds a powerful new emotional dimension to his vision of dystopia. Their challenge has been both to argue for ways in which music can both suffocate and inspire, both quash human creativity and nourish it.

The book’s potential for the theatre also lies in the fact that – while they are rarely able to say so – the majority of its characters do strongly disagree with one another. *Brave New World* is full of incendiary, slippery debates which readily adapt to the stage. But the really powerful confrontation is the one between the play and the audience.

The challenge that our play presents to its audience concerns the here and now, asking how we live our lives today and how we treat one another within the conditions of our own *Brave New World*. Aldous Huxley almost lost his sight as a young man following a rare eye disease, and vision became a major theme in his work. Here he asks us to look at ourselves and to consider what forces within our culture and conditioning stop us from seeing our world as it really is. And when we look more closely, will we see that 2015 has become a *Brave New World*?