

Sam Harrington

Professor Hart

THEA 201

March 28, 2025

### Staging *Woyzeck* for a Contemporary Audience

*Woyzeck* is an influential play written by Georg Büchner in 1836, left incomplete at his death. *Woyzeck* follows Franz Woyzeck, a soldier burdened by poverty and exploitation. Throughout the play, the audience sees Woyzeck tormented by people like the Captain and Doctor. As the play continues, so does Woyzeck's descent into madness as, societal pressures, jealousy, and his deteriorating mental state overwhelms him. In the final climactic moment, Woyzeck murders his partner, Marie.

For a contemporary staging of *Woyzeck*, it would need to include and display the themes that are highlighted in the play. This being class oppression, mental health, powerlessness, and dehumanization. The original play accomplished this through a fragmented, open-ended structure. My approach to staging *Woyzeck* would take on a different feel, drawing inspiration from Disney's animated *Robin Hood*, in which the characters are animals serving as caricatures of the people they represent. This allows the emotions to be personified in a very visual way, in which the audience could take cues of Woyzeck's descent in madness.

A director has a lot to do to bring to life any production. One of the ways they begin this challenge, is by doing a dramatic inventory; it is the process of breaking down the production into a series of check boxes. This is important because from Banister Payne's *Dramatic Inventory*, "Inventories provide a way to determine basic needs of a text, [but] much thought is needed to find the internal relationships between its many parts. Understanding how these parts relate to the whole is the major step in understanding what the text means." (Payne, 198). With the wide array of needs that a dramatic inventory requires, we will have to limit ourselves in the depth we discuss everything.

When undertaking the dramatic inventory, I carefully balanced practical constraints, creative intuition, and external thematic research, as Payne suggests, "Scenography design can never be a simple straight-line accomplishment" (Payne, 199). The choice of animal masks, while creatively intuitive, also provides practical clarity: masks simplify actors' physical and emotional portrayals, reducing the need for elaborate makeup or subtle facial expressions. Additionally, my external research into symbolic animal traits informed character assignments—Woyzeck as a bear communicates primal strength and vulnerability, and the Captain as an eagle highlights predatory dominance. This choice clearly represents the internal struggles of powerlessness and societal oppression, making abstract themes visually concrete and accessible to contemporary audiences.

We begin with the design elements of the play. To start, everyone will be wearing masks of the animal that they are playing - Woyzeck would be a bear for example, and the Captain would be a bald eagle. Noted in Lauri Wolf's *Introduction to Theatre*, "Updating the setting

invites audiences to re-examine timeless social issues through a new lens.” (Wolf, 23). As mentioned above, this would help the audience see the societal pressures and how it effects Woyzeck. The next element is scenery; I envision creating a medieval-inspired town reminiscent of one in Disney’s *Robin Hood*. The set would include wooden taverns, market stalls, cobblestone streets, and dimly lit alleyways, immediately immersing the audience in a world that feels simultaneously familiar and yet distant enough to encourage suspension of disbelief. This would allow themes of poverty and hierarchy to be at the forefront in the audience’s mind.

Lighting is another important aspect of the dramatic inventory. To complement the tavern and medieval feel of the play, I envision warm, dim lighting enveloping the characters, stage, and audience. I want dim warm light to envelope the characters, stage and audience. This brings the audience closer to the characters themselves. As Woyzeck becomes mad, the lighting will becoming harsher, casting large visible shadow – hinting that the man Woyzeck once was, has been left behind.

For the directing elements, I would begin with telling the actors to embody the animals that they are supposed to be playing. That is as Wolf puts it, “Actors amplify character traits through movement and voice.” (Wolf, 13). This would allow for the personifications to come to life on stage. The masks and animal-like movements would help establish clear emotional and thematic archetypes, simplifying audience understanding.

For genre and style, I would combine elements of folk theatre into the production. Like Disney’s *Robin Hood*, this production would employ playful exaggeration and storytelling reminiscent of folklore, creating an engaging yet critically reflective experience. Integrating these elements, my production would deliver a visually rich, emotional, yet intellectually provocative staging of *Woyzeck*. Inspired by the storytelling of *Robin Hood*, animal archetypes would illuminate deep human truths within a stylized medieval landscape, resonating powerfully with contemporary audiences.

Overall, my contemporary staging of *Woyzeck* addresses the prompt by incorporating clear directing and design choices inspired by Disney’s *Robin Hood*. I selected scenery reminiscent of a medieval-style town, employed animal masks for clear physical archetypes, performance techniques to enhance the personification, and used expressive lighting to visually represent psychological states. Additionally, I explicitly drew upon Banister Payne’s Dramatic Inventory to balance practical considerations, intuitive choices, and thematic depth in the staging process. I also utilized key concepts and vocabulary from Lauri Wolf’s *Introduction to Theatre* to reinforce themes of oppression, powerlessness, and psychological deterioration, creating a production that invites critical reflection from contemporary audiences.

## Works Cited

Payne, Banister. *Creative Research in Theatre: Dramatic Inventory*. pp. 190-199.

Wolf, Lauri J. *Introduction to Theatre*. Chapters 1-5.

Büchner, Georg. *Woyzeck*. 1836.

WOLFECK STAYS HIS CAPTAIN'S



ITEM IN THE LOU



WOLFECK'S MOTHER