

Dansen

(1939)

by Bertolt Brecht



*Liberated from
capitalist control
to educate the masses
by
Socialist Stories*

Characters:

DANSEN

THE STRANGER

On the stage are three house fronts. One is a tobacco shop with the sign: 'Austrian - Tobacconist'. The second is a shoe shop with the sign: 'Czech - Boots and Shoes'. The third is not a shop, but a sign in the window reads: 'Fresh ham'. Next to this house front there is a large iron door with a sign saying: 'Svendson. Iron'.

I

Beside the door sits Dansen. He is a small man. In front of him is a tub. He is holding a pig under his arm.

DANSEN *to the audience:* I'm a little man, respected, well-off and independent. I get along perfectly with my neighbours. We settle all disagreements between us peacefully through an organisation to which almost all of us belong. We have contracts that cover everything. So far we've been doing fine. I have my freedom and my business connections, I have my friends and my customers, I have my principles and I raise pigs. *He starts scrubbing the pig in the tub.* There. And now, my boy, hold still and let me wash your rosy ears. We've got to look nice when the customers turn up: healthy, happy, and succulent. If we're good and eat properly, we'll go far in life. The customer will say: That's a good little pig. After all, what do you want in this world? What does your little heart desire? You desire to be sold. Oh, you're clever. Whenever you suspect that I'm neglecting you, that I've forgotten your heart's desire for one moment, you let out a loud squeal and remind me. If anyone passes by who looks the least bit as if he hadn't eaten yet, you squeal. That way I myself have nothing to worry ab . . .

The pig squeals.

DANSEN *looks up, pleased*: What is it? What is it? Is somebody coming? A customer?

Stealthily, looking anxiously around, an armed man approaches the tobacco shop; his hat is drawn down over his eyes. He stops outside the closed door and takes a bunch of passkeys out of his trouser pocket. He tries them one after another, meanwhile smiling at Dansen, whose hair is beginning to stand on end. Finally the burglar loses patience and climbs in through the window, holding a large pistol. Immediately a terrible din is heard from inside: a falling chair, loud cries for help. Dansen jumps up in horror. With the pig under his arm, he runs around wildly. Then he rushes to the telephone.

DANSEN: Svendson, Svendson! What should I do? They're shouting for help in the tobacco shop across the street. A stranger has broken in before my very eyes. – What, you can hear the screams from where you are? – No, of course I can't go in, I have no right to barge into someone else's house. But what should I do when he comes out? I'm trembling with indignation. – Don't worry, I'll give him a good piece of my mind. You know my policy, no, not insurance policy, policy . . . *After warily looking around, he sings into the telephone in a muffled voice:*

A Dansen does his duty
In every town and land
For his sincere opinions
He bravely takes his stand.

In short, I'll fling my loathing in his face. As I said, I'm trembling with indignation.

The calls for help have stopped. A scream, a pistol shot, and a loud thud are heard.

DANSEN: I've got to hang up. I have to sit down. I think my hair has turned grey.

Deep in gloom, he sits down again outside the house, his pig under his arm. The stranger comes out of the tobacco shop, quickly crosses out the word 'Austrian' with chalk and writes 'Ostmarker & Co.' over it. Then he steps up to Dansen.

THE STRANGER: Why are you looking so pale?

DANSEN: My dear fellow, I'll tell you. I'm pale with pent-up agitation.

THE STRANGER: You could learn from your charming little pig. He's pink and he stays pink.

DANSEN: But a pig isn't human. I'm pale with human emotion, and you know why.

THE STRANGER: What a *good* little pig!

DANSEN *points accusingly at the tobacco shop*: What . . . what . . . happened in there?

THE STRANGER: Do you really want to know?

DANSEN: Of course I want to know! Anything that happens to my fellow man . . .

The pig squeals a second time.

DANSEN: What is it? What is it?

THE STRANGER: You mean you don't want to know!

DANSEN *to the pig*: But that man . . . *He points at the tobacco shop.*

THE STRANGER: Did you know him?

DANSEN: Did I know him? No, yes, I'm sorry, I'm all mixed up. *Reproachfully*: We belonged to the same club.

THE STRANGER: What did you do in your club? Sell pigs?

DANSEN *morosely*: We played cards. We played non-intervention.

THE STRANGER: I can't afford that game. Too expensive.

DANSEN: We only play once a week. On Saturdays. *Points at the tobacco shop*. He comes too.

THE STRANGER: I don't think he'll be coming any more.

DANSEN: Are you going to tell him not to? That would be an outrage. I mean it. Austrian is a free man.

THE STRANGER *hesitantly*: Nobody'll be telling him anything now. *He laughs mirthlessly.*

DANSEN *indignantly*: What do you mean by that?

THE STRANGER: Do you really want to know?

DANSEN: Do I want to know? Yes, no. I don't know, my head is swimming. You stand here talking as if . . . and just a minute ago, with my own eyes, I saw . . . Of course I want to know! Abso . . .

The pig under his arm squeals a third time in terror, as though cruelly maltreated.

DANSEN *tonelessly, completes the word: . . . lutely. His confidence is gone; he is afraid to meet the eyes of the stranger, who is now stroking the pig.*

DANSEN: I don't understand the world any more. I'm a peace-loving man. I loathe violence and respect contracts. I have business connections and I have my freedom, a few customers and a few friends, I have my pig farm and my . . . *Almost without thinking: Would you care to buy a pig?*

THE STRANGER *flabbergasted: I beg your pardon?*

DANSEN: A pig? Three or four pigs? I could let you have them cheap. I've got so many. Too many. I've got pigs to burn.

THE STRANGER: Let's have one.

DANSEN *intently: Sure you don't want two?*

THE STRANGER: One.

DANSEN: But what will I do with the rest? They breed like rabbits. Every night I drown half a dozen in the cesspit, and every morning another dozen are born. *Gestures to the stranger to look into the pigsty.* You see, there are fourteen of them again.

THE STRANGER: *One.*

DANSEN: Take a good look at them. Aren't they healthy, amiable, and succulent? Don't they make your mouth water?

THE STRANGER *whose mouth is watering, with an effort: They're a luxury.*

DANSEN: How can you say such a thing when they're a hundred per cent edible? Even the ears. Even the toes. Fried pig's toes.

THE STRANGER: A luxury.

DANSEN *grieved, to the pig: You a luxury! Disappointed, to the stranger: In that case, we'll make it just two.*

THE STRANGER *loudly: One. I don't waste money on luxuries.*

DANSEN: You buy iron, though. You buy all the iron my friend Svendson can deliver.

THE STRANGER: Iron isn't a luxury. Iron is a necessity.

DANSEN *gives him the pig; his hands are trembling: My nerves*

are shot. That terrible experience just now . . . *He wipes the sweat off his neck with a red handkerchief.*

THE STRANGER: What's that red rag you've got there?

DANSEN: This?

THE STRANGER *roughly*: Yes, that. *He puts the pig back in the tub.*

DANSEN *eager to please*: It's not red. Look, it's got a white cross on it. *He points at it.*

THE STRANGER: Okay. *He throws money down.*

DANSEN: I'll wrap it up for you.

THE STRANGER: Take this paper. Otherwise you'll charge me for the wrapping. *He hands him a large sheet of paper he has taken out of his pocket.*

DANSEN *smoothing out the paper*: But this is a contract!

THE STRANGER: What kind of a contract?

DANSEN: With Mr Austrian, I think. Friendship pact, it says. Don't you need it any more?

THE STRANGER: No. What's the use of a friendship pact with a stiff? *He takes the paper away from him and tears it up.*

DANSEN *almost fainting*: Quick, take the pig. I'm feeling sick. *The stranger takes the pig out of his hands. Dansen puts his handkerchief on his head.*

THE STRANGER *looking at the cross with irritation*: Put that cross away!

Dansen puts the handkerchief back in his pocket.

THE STRANGER: I'll take the pig as it is. Maybe I'll cut off a chunk on the way. *He takes it under his arm. But before he goes, he looks at the shoe shop.* Nice place, that shoe shop.

DANSEN: Yes, very nice.

THE STRANGER: Plenty of room. Your house isn't bad either.

DANSEN *without thinking*: I like it.

THE STRANGER *looking at it dreamily*: Well, I'll be seeing you. *Goes out.*

DANSEN *wiping his forehead, unnerved*: I'll be seeing you - I was so indignant I went and sold him a pig. Look what he's done to that nice peace-loving Mr Austrian. Just simply . . . The damn brute! *Looking anxiously around, he goes into the corner between his house and the warehouse door and*

grumbles: Barbarian! Inhuman monster! What a way to treat a contract!

2

Dansen is sitting in front of his house with a pig on his lap.

DANSEN: I'm a respected man, but a little one. I have a feeling things aren't right any more. The dreadful incidents lately have really got me down. Contracts are wonderful things, but if they're not held sacred . . . My two friends next door and I have been toying with the idea of arming ourselves. We're not entirely helpless. There aren't many supplies of iron beside my friend Svendson. Right here in the warehouse – *he points to Svendson's warehouse* – we've got quite a supply of iron. If we used it to forge weapons . . . It would be sheer madness to bury our heads in the sand. On the other hand, we can't afford a repetition of those dreadful events. Whatsisname can't do such a thing twice.

Stealthily, looking anxiously around, the stranger approaches the shoe shop; his cap is drawn down over his eyes. He stops outside the closed door and takes a bunch of passkeys out of his trouser pocket. He tries them one after another, shaking his head now and then and smiling at Dansen, whose hair is beginning to stand on end. Finally the stranger loses patience and climbs in through the window, holding a large pistol. Immediately a terrible din is heard from inside: a falling chair, loud cries for help.

DANSEN: He's done it again. This is terrible. And to think that the poor old woman had an agreement with him. There's something sick about that man's greed. Whatever he sees he wants. What about my own house? Not bad, he said. I'll have to take very firm steps immediately. And whatever I do, I mustn't attract his attention. I'll have to disappear. But how can I prevent him from seeing me? Ah, the tub! *With the pig under his arm, he pulls the tub, which he ordinarily uses to wash his pigs in, over his head.*

The stranger steps out of the shoe shop. He hurriedly crosses out the name 'Czech' with chalk and writes 'Böhm & Mohr,

Inc.' At this moment Dansen's pig is heard squealing inside the tub.

DANSEN: What is it? What is it? Is somebody coming? A customer? *He looks out cautiously, sees the stranger writing, and ducks back in again.*

The stranger steps forward, takes a sheet of paper from his pocket and tears it up. The scraps fall to the ground.

THE STRANGER: Hey, what's become of that pig farmer? Probably stepped out for a drink. Good chance to take a look at Svendson's iron warehouse. *Looking around, he saunters over to the warehouse door and, turning his back to it, tries the handle. But the door is locked.*

Suddenly Dansen's phone rings. At first Dansen sits motionless. When it goes on ringing, he is obliged to answer it. With extreme caution he gets up and with the tub still over him goes to the phone. The stranger looks with amazement at the walking tub.

THE STRANGER *instantly*: Mighty suspicious!

Since Dansen, under the tub, cannot see the stranger, he almost bumps into him, but the stranger, grinning, steps out of his way. Reaching the telephone, which rests on a low lard crate in front of the house, Dansen settles down, bent over the crate.

DANSEN *under his breath into the telephone, but the receiver reverberates slightly under the tub*: That you, Svendson? – Oh, you've heard the latest terrible news? – No, good God, not my place. Why do you keep thinking it happened at my place? It gives me the creeps. – Of course we've got to do something together. We'll have to consider taking very firm action. No, not take, consider. – Arm ourselves? Out of the question! – Stand united, yes, but arm, no. – United in what? In not arming! That would only attract his attention, and I've done everything in my power to avoid that. – Yes, I said we've got to be united. Our unity must be iron-clad and directed against no one. *Very emphatically*: Against no one. Then it can't attract attention. – Yes, Svendson, you can rely on me. – I understand perfectly that your mind wouldn't be at ease about your warehouse, no, not for a minute, if I were to give up one grain of my independence.

I'll keep my nose strictly out of the whole business. And stick to selling my pigs, period. – Where I keep the key to your warehouse? Where I always keep it, of course, on a string around my neck, under my shirt. – Naturally I keep my eyes open. – That burglary the other day, when your letter to me was stolen? Yes, but that was a burglary, there's nothing we can do about that. – Of course I won't give anybody the key, never! – Let somebody take it? What do you think I am? – Under pressure? Nobody has ever put pressure on me, I've never given anyone reason to. – I'm being watched? Ridiculous! Nobody's watching me, I'd notice it, wouldn't I? – You insist on strong action? I'm all for it. I suggest we sign a contract. Before the day's over we must absolutely sign a contract. – That's it, against everybody who doesn't keep their contracts. Listen. I have a brilliant idea, we'll agree not to sell any more iron to a certain notorious troublemaker and disturber of the peace, we'll offer it to decent people instead. – Not so brilliant? Why? – You say the big shots are already discussing effective measures?

The stranger, who has sat down and has been quietly listening, knocks on the tub.

DANSEN *in his tub, alarmed*: Hold on! I'll have to break off for a second. – No, I've got to wait on a customer. We'll go on with our discussion right away.

The stranger pulls him out of the tub by the seat of his pants.

THE STRANGER: Looks like I got here in the nick of time. How did you get stuck in that tub? If I hadn't come along, you'd have suffocated.

Dansen sits on the ground in sullen silence.

THE STRANGER: Why are you so quiet? Is something worrying you? You know, Dansen, I've been thinking the two of us ought to get better acquainted. It's really nice sitting here with you. The house is small but not at all bad. What would you say to a mutual friendship pact?

DANSEN *his hair standing on end*: Friendship pact . . .

THE STRANGER: Friendship pact. *He strokes Dansen's pig.* You're a good little pig! Are you a good little pig? I suggest we sign a pact. Saying we're friends. *He takes a pencil stub*

from his waistcoat pocket, stands up and picks up one of the paper scraps from the ground. On the back of the scrap he scribbles a few words. You simply agree not to attack me under any circumstances, if for instance I take one of your pigs or something. And I agree in return that you can call on me for protection at any time. Well, what do you say?

DANSEN: No offence, but I wouldn't want to make that kind of decision on the spur of the moment.

THE STRANGER: You wouldn't?

Dansen's pig squeals for the second time.

DANSEN *aside to his pig*: You keep quiet! *To the stranger*: I'd have to phone my friend Svendson first.

THE STRANGER: Oh, so you won't sign? *Dansen is silent. That's funny. Didn't I hear you say you wanted a contract before the day's over? To Dansen's pig, stroking it*: You're a smart little pig. We understand each other. There'd never be any disagreement between us. But I guess it's no go. I don't force myself on anyone. If my offers of friendship are trampled underfoot, there's nothing for me to do but leave. *Looking offended, he stands up.*

The pig squeals a third time.

DANSEN *wipes the sweat from his neck with his red handkerchief*: Wait! *The stranger turns around. Maybe I was a little hasty. I've been so confused by the recent events. You wanted to buy a pig?*

THE STRANGER: Why not?

DANSEN *hoarsely*: Then give me the contract. *He signs. But don't you need a duplicate?*

THE STRANGER: Not necessary. *He takes the pig under his arm. Send me the bill in the New Year. On his way out: And kindly don't forget that you're friends with me now and you're to choose your company accordingly. I'll be seeing you.*

DANSEN *in amazement*: Now I've made a friendship pact with *him. Holding the contract, he returns hesitantly to the phone. Hello, Svendson. It's Dansen. I've got something to tell you. No sooner said than done, I've made a contract. - With whom? With Whatsisname. - He doesn't keep to contracts? But I've got his personal signature. Hold on, let's*

see what it says . . . I haven't read it through yet . . . oh yes, *he* agrees not to attack me, and *I* agree not to help anyone he attacks. – If he attacks you? Out of the question. He can't keep on doing these things. Your warehouse is as safe as the Bank of England. – Who you can rely on? On me! You can rely on me. And I can rely on him.

3

Dansen is standing in front of his house, still on the phone.

DANSEN: I don't see how you can say our unity is in danger when I've been telling you now for three days and three nights that it's not in danger. – All right, let me tell you this: if he doesn't keep to this contract, I won't hesitate for one moment to invest every penny I've saved out of my pig business in the last five years on arming ourselves to the teeth with your iron. What do you think of that? – Right now it would be madness. There's no reason for it. – What *about the sky?* *He looks around.* Yes, my goodness, it really is red.

During the conversation the sky has turned slightly red. Muffled thunder in the distance.

DANSEN: Say, that's funny thunder. I think we'll have to break off. Got to take a look at my pigs. – Yes, of course, your warehouse too. I'm really glad about that contract now, especially for your sake. – Now you'll see what a shrewd move I made. Want to bet that Whatsisname is beginning to feel sorry he made me that promise? In any case we'll keep in tou . . . Hello! Are you there, Svendson? *He shakes the telephone, but the line has gone dead.* Damn it, this is a fine time for the phone to go dead! *He goes to the tub and fishes out his contract. Then he unties the rope attaching the pig to the tub.* Indeed, where would I be now without this paper? I'm dog-tired. The pigs were so restless I had to tie them up, and all this phoning has been a strain. And to make matters worse I'll have to stand guard outside the warehouse tonight, I owe that to my friend Svendson. *Shouldering the rolled-up contract like a rifle, he marches up*

and down in front of the warehouse, occasionally shading his eyes with one hand and peering into the distance. He soon begins to drag his feet. If I let my vigilance flag for so much as one second, the consequences for myself and my friends up the street will be incalculable. He sits down with his back to the warehouse wall; the pig is now on his lap. He yawns. It's unbelievable. Now he's even picking a fight with Pollack, the horse trader. Dozes off, wakes with a start, reaches for the big warehouse key that he is wearing around his neck, under his shirt, and pulls it out. Anyway I've got the key. He puts it back. I don't see why Pollack doesn't just sign ... a contract ... with him ... He falls asleep.

It gets dark. Only the reddish horizon remains visible. Slowly a sign with the words 'Dansen's Dream' on it comes down from the flies.

A rosy light fills the stage. Dansen and the stranger stand facing each other. Dansen is leading his pig on a rope and shouldering his contract. The stranger, still in civilian clothes, is armed to the teeth. He is wearing a steel helmet; he has hand-grenades in his belt, and a tommy-gun under his arm.

THE STRANGER: I've been attacked. I was paying an innocent little visit to a certain Pollack, I'd arranged to meet a friend of mine at his place. While I was in the house, the neighbours surrounded me and attacked me. You've got to help me.

DANSEN: But ...

THE STRANGER: Don't talk so much. I haven't a moment to lose. There's not enough iron in my house. I need the key to my friend Svendson's warehouse right away.

DANSEN: But I can't let it out of my hands.

THE STRANGER: You can give it to me. The warehouse definitely needs protection, it's full of iron and you're in no position to defend it. Give me the key! Quick!

DANSEN: But the key was given to me for safekeeping. I'll at least have to phone my friend Svendson first ...

THE STRANGER: Your safekeeping is my safekeeping. This is no time to quibble. Hands up! *He threatens him with his tommy-gun.*

Dansen suddenly aims his contract at the stranger and stands motionless in this menacing position.

THE STRANGER *not believing his eyes*: Are you out of your mind? What's that you've got there?

DANSEN: My contract!

THE STRANGER *contemptuously*: Contracts! Who says I have to respect contracts?

DANSEN: Maybe you don't have to respect the others. But you've got to respect this one with me!

THE STRANGER *letting his gun drop*: This is terrible! I need that iron. Everybody's against me.

DANSEN: I'm sorry.

THE STRANGER: But I'm lost without it. I'll be trampled to a pulp, do you hear me, a pulp!

DANSEN: You should have thought of that before, my friend.

THE STRANGER: My whole livelihood is at stake! I've got to get in there! I've got to, I've got to!

DANSEN *holds up the paper*: I'm sorry, it can't be done.

THE STRANGER: I'll buy all your pigs, Dansen, if you'll cooperate!

DANSEN: I can't do it, friend.

Dansen's pig squeals. A gong sounds in the distance.

DANSEN: Shut up! When freedom is at stake. *To the stranger*: We're sorry.

THE STRANGER *going down on his knees, sobbing*: Please, I beg you, the key! Don't be heartless! My family, my wife, my children, my mother, my grandmother! My aunts!

DANSEN: It can't be done. I deeply sympathise, but it can't be done. A contract's a contract.

THE STRANGER *broken, stands up with difficulty*: There's only one thing left for me to do: hang myself. This contract is costing me, one of your best customers, my life. *Crushed, he turns to go.*

The pig squeals a second time. Again the distant gong.

DANSEN: Shut up. You make me sick. You haven't got a pennyworth of morality. *To the stranger*: And you, don't come to me any more with your immoral demands, understand! They won't wash with me, the next time I might lost my patience! *As the stranger staggers away,*

Dansen, clutching the contract in his fist, sings the third stanza of 'King Christian Stood by the Tall Mast'.

Niels Juel he shouted to the gale

'The time has come!'

Hoisted the red flag like a sail

And bade the enemy turn tail.

Aloud he shouted in the gale

'The time has come!'

'Vile knaves,' he shouted, 'leave the stage!

For who will not to Dansen's rage

Succumb!'

But when he comes to the last line, he is horrified to hear the pig squeal a third time. The stranger suddenly turns around looking triumphant. Darkness. Another sign is lowered. On it is written 'And Dansen's Awakening'.

The light goes on. The pig has gone on squealing. Beside Dansen, who is still leaning against the warehouse door asleep, stands the stranger, armed to the teeth. He gives Dansen a kick. Dansen wakes up with a start.

THE STRANGER: Give me that key!

DANSEN: I can't let anyone have it!

THE STRANGER: Then you're breaking the contract, you swine. You think you can make a friendship pact with me and then refuse me your friendship? *Kicks him.* You think you can cheat me out of the key I need to get at the iron? Now you've proved you're my enemy, one of the worst. *He grabs the contract out of his hands and tears it up.* And now for the last time: give me that key!

Dansen reaches for the key and, staring at the stranger, takes it out. The stranger grabs it and opens the door.

DANSEN *amazed*: Goodness, I've honoured the contract by giving him Svendson's key!

THE STRANGER *in the doorway, turns around to Dansen, takes the pig's rope out of his hands and says menacingly*: I expect you to hand over the rest of the pigs without being asked, and I don't expect to see any bills! *He goes into Svendson's warehouse with Dansen's pig.*