

# A good deal to chew, and not all of it edible: Brecht and Mother Courage

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*Mother Courage and Her Children* by Bertolt Brecht, at the Classical Theater of Harlem, February 4-29

The recent production of German playwright Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* at the Classical Theater of Harlem in New York City was a well-intentioned if unsatisfying effort. In the end, it seems the company bit off more than it could immediately chew.

Brecht's play, written on the eve of World War II in 1938 when the writer was in exile in Scandinavia, is a critique of a certain kind of petty bourgeois opportunism. The play aims to show how the "little man," or woman in this case, who thinks him or herself an awfully clever operator, gets outwitted or simply crushed in the end by far more powerful social forces.

Mother Courage is a vendor of goods during the ghastly Thirty Years War (1618-48), which killed off half of Germany's population. She has gained her nickname by driving through "the bombardment of Riga like a madwoman, with fifty loaves of bread in my cart. They were going moldy, what else could I do?" (In Eric Bentley's standard translation.) In other words, this is "courage" directed by self-interest.

Courage loses her children, one by one. A recruiting officer is able to lure her son Eilif away ("Ten guilders in advance and you're a soldier of the king and a stout fellow and the women will be mad about you.") while his cohort diverts Mother Courage by negotiating the purchase of a belt. The moral is sung to the audience: "When a war gives you all you earn/One day it may claim something in return!"

Eilif becomes a monster, a murderer of peasants for their oxen. He's proclaimed a hero for his brutality in wartime, but during a peaceful interlude years later, his killing of a peasant's wife gets him executed.

Courage's second son, the all-too-honest Swiss Cheese, is lost to her when she places the value of her business operation—her cart full of goods—above his life. As paymaster of a Finnish regiment Swiss Cheese hides his cash box during a successful attack by Catholic troops. When he's taken prisoner Courage can win his freedom by paying off his captors. However, her haggling over the price of the bribe costs him his life. When Swiss Cheese's corpse is brought in, his mother—to save her own life—has to deny she even knows him. The Catholic sergeant says, "Throw him in the carrion pit. He has no one that knows him."

The third child, the deaf-mute Kattrin, becomes one more innocent victim of the war when she tries to warn the townspeople of Halle of an impending attack by beating on a drum from a rooftop. (Her mother has gone off to town, again about money, leaving her alone.) Despite warnings from the attacking soldiers, Kattrin carries on drumming until they shoot and kill her. Mother Courage leaves money for her daughter's burial, then pushes on with her cart: "I must get back into business."

The Classical Theater of Harlem was founded in 1999 by two teachers at the Harlem School of the Arts (a nonprofit cultural center), Alfred Preisser and Christopher McElroen—the director of *Mother Courage*—with \$9,000 of their own money. In exchange for use of the school's theater space, the pair, both white, agreed to use students, most of them black and Hispanic,

as actors and backstage. The company has performed Shakespeare, Jean Genet, Greek tragedy and comedy, Richard Wright (a play by McElroen based on *Native Son*), August Wilson and others.

Bruce Weber writes in the *New York Times*, "Their first production, *Macbeth*, which they presented in 2000 with a cast of 55, including 13 witches, was, the two men believe, the first professional production of the play in Harlem since 1936, when under the auspices of the W.P.A.'s Federal Theater Project, John Houseman, as producer, and Orson Welles, 21, as director, famously created what became known as the "Voodoo *Macbeth*," set in Haiti and performed by an all-black cast."

Clearly Preisser and McElroen (who receive no extra pay from the school for operating the theater) have something more than merely setting up one additional Off-off-Broadway space in New York in mind. Their decision to stage serious theater in a generally impoverished neighborhood speaks to their social conscience and a desire presumably to present a cultural alternative to the products currently offered. That their first production paid homage to the 1936 *Macbeth* directed by Welles, an individual imbued with a democratic outlook who sought to bring Shakespeare to wide layers of the population, can hardly be coincidental.

That having been said, good intentions do not by themselves solve the complex artistic problems involved in staging Shakespeare, Euripides, Brecht or anyone else. One feels that with *Mother Courage*, the company has gone some halfway toward confronting the particular challenges of this well-known play.

Brecht's work is a difficult piece to mount. First, it treats the complicated twists and turns of the Thirty Years War, events with whom audiences will not in general be familiar. Second, there is the matter of the playwright's socio-political irony. Irony is not an American strong point. And, although some of the more obvious points come across in this production, a good many of the more subtle insights are lost. Third, this is a long and demanding play, with songs, numerous scene (and narrative) shifts and a large cast.

Preisser told the *New York Times*: "We like big theater, plays with large ideas." This is entirely commendable. However, there's "many a slip twixt the cup and the lip," particularly within the current artistic climate. It is not astonishing, but one has the sense that the director of this production of *Mother Courage* has too often tended to confuse "broad" and "obvious" with "big."

The production makes use of television sets and a Fox news anchorman to transmit the brief plot summaries that Brecht included at the beginning of each scene. These were displayed as titles on stage in productions during Brecht's lifetime, intended as they were to remove suspense and assist the spectator in concentrating on the events themselves. (For example, "Mother Courage at the height of her business career" or "Three years pass and Mother Courage, with parts of a Finnish regiment, is taken prisoner. Her daughter is saved, her wagon likewise, but her honest son dies.") Video and audio clips of US interventions in Iraq, Panama are also used. The juxtaposition of seventeenth century and twenty-first century

technologies, clothing and implements is not always helpful.

The acting itself, with honorable exceptions, is rather broad and even at times caricaturish, particularly the role of the camp-follower Yvette. In general, the production does not give the audience enough credit for its ability to follow and think through complex situations. (Unfortunate, considering that was Brecht's stated purpose.) There may be a concern on the company's part, that, given the generally low level of historical knowledge and political awareness, every theme and turning point must be spelled out in large letters. The result, however, is counterproductive. One feels that the production is rushed, a trifle lacking in self-confidence, and even its own more sensitive moments get lost in the shuffle.

Some of this is perhaps the inevitable product at present of the company's limited resources. The performers certainly demonstrated commitment and seriousness. Gwendolyn Mulamba as Mother Courage, Michael Early as the Chaplain and Oberon K.A. Adjepong as the Cook stand out in one's memory. However, their efforts are somewhat undermined by the "busier" and broader aspects of the production. Perhaps the least helpful thing to have done was to add chaos, noise and contemporary "bits" to an already complex piece.

McElroen told Weber of the *Times*, "It's a fairly aggressive and modern approach. Our Mother Courage is selling T-shirts that say 'Got Courage?' and 'I Survived the Bombardment of Riga.' I mean, if she were around today, she'd be down at the World Trade Center site selling trinkets."

What is a modern approach? Introducing contemporary elements does not necessarily make the piece any more modern or 'relevant.' Despite the energy of the company, the overall effort is somewhat unfocused. The generally anti-militarist and anti-establishment attitude communicated by the Harlem production, I suspect, did not come as a great revelation to anyone in its audience.

The company does highlight certain of Brecht's insights into war and imperial ambitions that have an uncanny bearing on current events. When King Gustavus of Sweden invades Poland, he has only its "liberation" in mind, of course, not its plunder. As Courage explains: "The trouble here in Poland is that the Poles *would* keep meddling. It's true our King moved in on them with man, beast and wagon, but instead of keeping the peace the Poles attacked the Swedish King when he was in the act of peacefully withdrawing. So they were guilty of a breach of the peace and their blood is on their own heads."

The Chaplain continues, "Anyway, our King was thinking of nothing but freedom. The Kaiser [Holy Roman Emperor] enslaved them all, Poles and Germans alike, so our King *had* to liberate them."

The hostility to war and war makers is deeply imbedded in the play. When Katrin, in Scene Six, is attacked and beaten by soldiers, Courage calls them "animals." The Chaplain replies, "At home they never did those shameful things. The men who start the wars are responsible, they bring out the worst in people." On the other hand, the recruiting officer's crony declares contemptuously, "Peace is one big waste of equipment."

However, one suspects that much of the play's force, its argument in particular about the follies—and catastrophic consequences—of shortsightedness and opportunism, flew over the heads of the spectators, because the necessary dramaturgical precision was not there in the production.

Added to the limitations of the production, there is the matter of the play itself and its problems. A truly modern (i.e., critical) approach to *Mother Courage* might need to take those into account.

Brecht (1898-1956) always insisted that Mother Courage was not a figure for whom one should primarily have sympathy. He argued that if she had acted otherwise, things might have turned out differently.

In creating his lead character presumably the playwright had in mind a particular lower middle-class type—calculating, energetic, limited. A remarkable improviser, Courage's cynical "realism" only applies to a certain range of activities.

Courage can see that the "defeats and victories of the fellows at the top aren't always defeats and victories for the fellows at the bottom. Not at all. There've been cases where a defeat is a victory for the fellows at the bottom, it's only their honor that's lost, nothing serious." When her behavior, justifying her nickname "Courage," is praised, the woman replies, "The poor need courage. Why? They're lost. That they even get up in the morning is something—in *their* plight."

Mother Courage sees through the claims and pretensions of the big shots, but cannot establish any independence from their system of doing things. She remains entirely at the mercy of the decisions, shifts in policy and even whims of the "great" people. So, although she dodges this or that misfortune, she or her family never avoids the truly fatal blows. At every decisive juncture, her actions confirm the social order and seal her children's fate.

Brecht disliked the first audiences' sympathetic response to the character of Mother Courage (the play was produced by Leopold Lindtberg in Zurich in 1941 and then by Brecht and Erich Engel in East Berlin in 1949). Speaking of the opening scene, he commented: "We felt that that the tradeswoman's voluntary and active participation in the war was made clear enough by showing the great distance which she has travelled to get into it. ... [I]t appeared that many people see Courage as the representative of the 'little people' who get 'caught up' in the war because 'there's nothing they can do about it,' they are 'powerless in the hand of fate', etc. Deep-seated habits lead theatre audiences to pick on the characters' more emotional utterances and forget all the rest. Business deals are accepted with the same boredom as descriptions of landscape in a novel."

Courage's inability to learn anything from the war, despite years of suffering and loss, disturbed the playwright. Criticizing the Zurich production on the basis of press accounts, Brecht suggested that it must have "presented a picture of war as a natural disaster, an unavoidable blow of fate, and so confirmed the petty bourgeois spectator's confidence in his own indestructibility." He continued, "Yet the play always left the equally petty bourgeois Courage quite free to choose whether or no she should take part [in the war]. Hence the production must have represented Courage's business activity, her keenness to get her cut, her willingness to take risks, as a 'perfectly natural,' 'eternally human' way of behaving, so that she was left without any alternative."

One of Brecht's great concerns was to reproduce social life in his dramas in such a manner that its "unnaturalness" and hence its "alterability" were emphasized. A good many of his experiments, including the use of so-called "alienation effects" (theatrical techniques aimed at making the events on stage less "familiar" and socially inevitable to the spectator), were directed along these lines, at encouraging the spectator to view critically (historically) his or her own social circumstances.

Of course, in regard to Mother Courage's own possibilities, it is not clear precisely what the playwright was suggesting. There is an oddly ahistorical character to Brecht's chastisement of his lead character. As translator Eric Bentley notes pointedly in his introduction to the Grove Press edition of the play, "What would she have done? Established Socialism in seventeenth-century Germany?"

This is not the occasion for an exhaustive treatment of Brecht's career, which is long overdue, but it is worth noting that his comments on Mother Courage carry with them certain not insignificant implications.

Brecht describes his own portrayal in 1938 of Courage's incapacity "to learn from the futility of war" as "prophetic." He made no secret of the fact that he had the current world situation, dominated by threats of a new world war, in mind when he wrote the play.

What is the logic of this remark? That the German population, or considerable portions of it, had not learned from the "futility" and horror of World War I and were therefore susceptible to being dragged into

another, worse slaughter.

But indeed if the German petty bourgeoisie, to limit ourselves to the social layer about whose situation and social psychology Brecht writes, proved vulnerable to the siren song of another imperialist war (a questionable proposition) or perhaps couldn't see their way out of it, whose political responsibility was that?

In considering and dramatizing these issues (or avoiding them) at the time Brecht faced a significant obstacle: his association with one of the movements principally responsible in a political sense for the defeat of working people in Germany and the victory of Hitler's Nazis, the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) and the Stalinist Communist International.

Germany had no shortage of revolutionary crises between the end of World War I in November 1918 and the coming to power of Hitler in January 1933. If those opportunities were squandered, it was the fault neither of the working class or petty bourgeois masses, but first and foremost of those organizations claiming to represent the interests of broad layers of the working population: German Social Democracy (SPD), whose counterrevolutionary character was demonstrated in 1914 by its support for the first world war, and the Communist Party, which claimed the legacy of the Russian Revolution but which fell under the domination of the national-bureaucratic Stalinist faction as the 1920s wore on.

In Germany from the late 1920s the KPD pursued a catastrophic "left" line, on orders from Moscow, of denouncing the reformist Social Democrats as nothing more than the left wing of fascism. The German Stalinist leadership rejected a common front with the SPD against Hitler, letting the reformists off the hook and dividing the working class in the face of the fascist threat.

In short, the Nazis, whose electoral support had actually peaked before January 1933, were only able to assume power after the Social Democrats and Stalinists of the KPD proved incapable, over a decade and a half, of leading in increasingly desperate population out of the morass. Germany's participation in a new world war and the Holocaust were the horrible price paid for the failure of the working class to put an end to German imperialism.

Brecht and his family fled Germany after the Reichstag fire in February 1933, settling first in Denmark. If he was critical of KPD policies, there is no record of it. He may very well have been. We know that Brecht read Trotsky, indeed that he told his friend Walter Benjamin that Trotsky was the greatest living writer in Europe. These thoughts, however, he kept to himself. (Benjamin himself was made "breathless" by reading Trotsky.)

Again, this is not the occasion for an overall assessment of Brecht's career, but one can certainly make the case that the historic defeat of the German working class, the playwright's exile and his continuing link to the Stalinist movement brought about a severe decline in the authenticity, liveliness and concreteness of his work.

With the exception of *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*—a valuable piece, in which Hitler is recast as a smalltime Chicago hood, but a play that sidesteps entirely the issue of the failure of the working class movement in Germany—none of Brecht's major plays following 1933 treat contemporary life. (*Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* is a relatively minor work, which also sidesteps the political problems that permitted Hitler to seize power.)

*Galileo*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Good Person of Szechwan* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* resort to the parable form or to historical analogy to work through their themes, which tend to be rather abstract (and generally gloomy) historical lessons, or lectures to the oppressed (or intellectuals) as to how they should conduct themselves.

These works, in my view, lack spontaneity and any great sense of artistic experimentation or intellectual exploration. The author has already drawn certain conclusions and the plays consist of the 'fleshing out' of

these already arrived at and rather pat conclusions. Of course the works are beautifully constructed, almost "classical," because Brecht was a brilliant talent, but they lack incandescence and convulsiveness.

In my opinion, they are of considerably less artistic interest than either the early quasi-nihilist, quasi-anarchistic *Baal*, *Drums in the Night* and *In the Jungle of the Cities*, or the more mature works of the middle and late 1920s, *Man Equals Man*, *The Threepenny Opera*, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* and *St. Joan of the Stockyards*.

Precisely how Brecht's relationship to the Stalinist parties—and their role in the historical traumas of the mid-twentieth century—found expression in his dramatic (and poetic) efforts is naturally a complex problem, which requires a separate study, but one certainly feels that the deliberate avoidance by this left-wing, "communist" playwright of the most acute and burning problem of his day—the problem of working class leadership and perspective—had serious consequences. (Such a study would also investigate the extent to which Brecht's "alienation effect" and other methods were in part attempts to overcome through clever *technical-organizational* means what, in fact, were problems of political orientation among masses of people.)

The very decision to create a popular figure in *Mother Courage*, whether "petty bourgeois" or not, who fails "to learn anything from the futility of war" and is therefore somehow responsible for the catastrophes that befall her, suggests a wrong emphasis, indeed a seriously misconceived notion of the events of the twentieth century. Such a conception had to cut away at the artistic-intellectual integrity and force of the piece. A critical discussion of Brecht and his complex legacy is much needed.



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