A comment on Brecht in Los Angeles

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Mother Courage and Her Children, *by Bertolt Brecht, directed by Andrew J. Robinson, produced by The Antaeus Company, at New Place Theater Center, North Hollywood, California, through May 22, 2005*

Lately it seems that every few weeks another production of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* is being mounted somewhere in Greater Los Angeles. For all I know, it's a nationwide epidemic. There are good reasons for the phenomenon. The play speaks to the plight of those caught in the crossfires of seemingly endless wars; add Brecht's contempt for both demagogues and political states that wrap themselves in banners of competing religions, and the rationale for doing this play becomes overwhelming.

With so many actors struggling to make sense of a tipping world through their art, it's little wonder so many companies are taking their shot at Brecht's 1939 masterpiece, about a vendor of goods during the Thirty Years War (1618-48) who loses her children, one by one, primarily through her own petty bourgeois short-sightedness. Companies are mustering their resources to assemble the play's large cast, including musicians, and to find or adapt their typically cramped quarters to accommodate its crowds and sprawl. Doing Brecht, especially this play, satisfies the need to politically engage the world in a time when so much of performing art is marginalized from the public discourse.

Good intentions, however, don't necessarily make good theater. Many an ensemble has stumbled over the play's pitfalls, the stumblers typically excusing their more awkward moments by evoking Brecht's theory of alienation (more on this later). I've seen some doozies. And a few beauties. But after experiencing the new production of *Mother Courage* at the Antaeus, I won't feel the urge to see another for a while. It's that good. It does what I suspect Brecht would have wanted—it entertains while disturbing comfortable preconceptions, challenges human acquiescence to the seemingly unstoppable flow of events, and forces its audience to grapple with the contradictions of war and peace, commerce and want, servility and rebellion. Its view of a universe in tumult is from the bottom of the social hierarchy—looking up and sideways and askance.

I'm tempted to quote at length from director Andrew J. Robinson's eloquent program note but will restrain myself. If you want to read the full text you'll have to see the play or visit the company's site at www.antaeus.org. As Robinson succinctly points out, Brecht wrote this play just as "Europe was embarking on the next chapter of a festival of death that began in 1914." By setting the play in Germany, Sweden, and Bavaria during the Thirty Years War and focusing on the particularly chaotic stretch of 1624 to 1635, Brecht satisfied his impulse for what he called "epic theater." It gave him a canvas and a narrative sufficiently removed in time from his present to hold up a parabolic mirror to human nature and revel in the fun-house distortions of power politics as they warp the lives of conscripts and camp-followers on the muddy roads and barren fields of a war zone. Robinson writes:

"It's too facile to say that the obvious parallels exist in 2005. Of course they do, but religious warfare, and the 'continuation of business' through conflict have mutated to create our own present surreal drama: paying for Iraq with the oil we 'liberate,' the blood of countless thousands of Americans, Iraqis and Europeans, leaders who skipped out on other wars sanctimoniously intoning over the dead bodies of young men and women, tax breaks to the rich while deficits reach record heights and millions of people live without health care and the bare necessities, degradation of the physical (I guess we'll pay for Iraq and the tax breaks with oil from Alaskan wilderness) and moral (Orwellian big lies abounding) environment all calculated to keep the machine greased and rolling and invested political and corporate power intact."

Robinson has the good sense in his staging of this production to avoid stating the obvious parallels, letting the text and players live, breathe, scam, flirt with love while flaunting death, and simply survive with as much dignity and humor and hope as they can manage. There are no desert sands and pumping oil wells imaged here, no cleverly uniformed officers in fatigues or hiphop whores in hot pants. He doesn't play games with period or futz with special effect. Robinson gets the job done with an ensemble that's totally up to the task. And they do it with an air of the down and dirty, on the cheap, with crackling theatrical dazzle.

Peter Brook once said that theatre begins with an empty space. The warehouse in which Antaeus presents this production is as close to raw empty space as you'd probably ever want to get. Basically a large high-ceilinged shed buttressed by rough wooden posts and beams, risers with an eclectic herd of chairs that range from wrought iron patio furniture to modern dining chairs cushioned by a motley collage of fanny pads. The night I attended was unseasonably cold for spring in Southern California. Needless to say, the theatre was unheated, bringing a special verité to scenes set in an unforgiving, post-medieval North European winter. Unfinished nooks, crannies, and partial lofts provide "found" upstage playing areas. "Backstage" lurks behind parallel windrows of tall wardrobe racks behind the wings of a three-sided playing area, actors still applying grime to hands and faces at tiny make-up shelves as the audience wandered in. A visible and play-appropriately costumed ensemble of musicians played the pre-

show with a consciously affected “amateur” air. Michele K. Short (costumes), Hohn Iacovelli (set), Ellen Monocroussos (lights), and Chuck Olsen (props) masterfully complemented one another’s contributions. (The tale of how this oversized shed got turned into a performance space is epic theater in itself; that after so much hard dirty work their transformed space has been sold out from under the company is part of the on-going tragi-comedy of theatre in Los Angeles.)

Antaeus has been around for fifteen years now. Its penchant is for classic theatre. It boasts a fairly large company of actors and other theatre artists in addition to a loyal following. The cast of this production of *Mother Courage*, with a number of roles, including a few key ones, double-cast, is rich in seasoned players, artists who’ve worked together often, some for many years. That shared history is what transforms a company into an ensemble and it shows in the playing. Anne Gee Byrd’s tour-de-force performance in the titular role would not be nearly so affecting if not for this superb ensemble, each of whom claims a show-stealing moment. David Nichols of the *LA Times* described Ms. Byrd’s brilliant and sturdy performance as “definitive.” It certainly was for me.

In addition to her galvanic work, I was especially knocked out by Rhonda Aldrich’s “Yvette,” the ambitious hard-traveled prostitute who climbs the social ladder seduction by seduction. Emily Eiden’s “Kattrin,” Mother’s mute longing-for-love daughter, was a profoundly moving portrait of a girl’s difficult path to womanhood, from burdensome offspring to helpmate to victim until her epiphany as drum-banging rebel who risks—and ultimately sacrifices—her life in order to save the inhabitants of a town of strangers about to be attacked and pillaged by yet another invading army. There was more in-your-face to-the-barricade rebellion is this slight young woman’s defiant banging on a hand drum than you’ll find in six road tours of “Les Miz.” Henry Groener’s “Cook,” with whom Mother sustains a good-humored decade-long flirtation and who turns out to have been Yvette’s first love and despoiler, managed to pull off the difficult task of evoking our sympathies for his plight as he scrapes for food and shelter and then deeply disappointing us when he reveals a streak of selfishness that is more detestable for its being so understandable.

Geoffrey Wade in his three different military roles, John Sloan and Tim Veneable as Mother’s sons (from different fathers), John Apicella as the Recruiting Officer, Philip Proctor as the Chaplain with flexible denominational loyalties, and Janellen Steininger as the puckish, no-nonsense Narrator, each inhabit this play and their respective characters in ways that—how to put this?—actually made me want the play to be longer than it already is. I secretly wanted the central story fleshed out with sidebar tales of each of their lives, whole new plays featuring each—and this on a night when, for a full ten minutes, I had to sit on my hands to warm them and squirmed with the after-effects of the hot coffee I’d gulped at halftime. Like I said before, it was that good. It wasn’t as if Antaeus had channeled Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble, but Antaeus certainly managed to pick up its mantle and carry it forth. All those reasons Andrew Robinson gave for doing this play (comparable to those that Brecht had for writing it) came through in loud, clear, and disturbingly complicated fashion.

The heart of Brecht’s oft-cited much-abused theory of “alienation” is that theatre is theatre, not real life; this type of theatre abjures so-called “kitchen-sink” realism and the polished naturalism so typical in so much well-heeled single-set interior productions. This is theatre that celebrates the fact that it is theatre, embracing the made-ness of it all, drawing attention to the fact that narrative is a construct by having a narrator announce scenes and offer loglines of the action to follow. It’s a kind of theatre that takes us in and out of the emotional lives of the characters, at one moment feeling for them and with them, the next being pushed back by some reminder that this is, after all, theatre, so that we can see their circumstances as if from a slightly abstracted perch. When it works, as it does in this production, it works like a bandit; when it doesn’t . . . well, there’s always intermission to look forward to.

Brecht’s enduring appeal among theatre artists is that, at least for the most part, theatre folk have always hugged the lower rungs of the social order. They’ve always been suspect as subversives—a mutation of that suspicion attaches to the way in which the political opinions of movie stars are dismissed as both dangerous *and* meaningless (note the contradiction) even when some of these soap-boxers demonstrate a far surer grasp of issues than the professional pundits and pols. Like the actresses of Molière’s troupe, the actor label has ever been tinged with the whiff of loose morals, loose living, and a promiscuity of ideas; at times, the words actress and prostitute were regarded as synonyms. To survive as a theatre artist, especially in a country where the performing arts are subsidized only at the major cultural institutional level, one must scramble like the camp-followers of Mother Courage’s entourage. There’s a natural sympathy among theatre folk for these “little people” living under the gun. With very little stretch, Mother Courage could be seen as the artistic director/star of an itinerant troupe of players.

Brecht’s own complicated personal and political history, not to mention his interpretation of Marxism and its application to theatre, deserves its own essay. What’s telling, however, is just how familiar and filled with common sense and simple humanity his values and ideas seem when brought to us in deeply entertaining and compelling productions of his plays, like this production of *Mother Courage and Her Children*. When the performing arts expose the greed and hypocrisy of the privileged and powerful, embrace solidarity with the weak, exploited, and oppressed, and whenever they mock the pretensions of the ruling elite and their lackeys, a great public service is done.