

Humanity trumps ideology in 'Courage'

By Katherine Karlin

Correspondent

"Thank God for corruption," says Anna Fierling, digging into her pockets. "As long as there's corruption, there's merciful judges."

Practical, tough-minded, opportunistic, Anna follows armies around Europe during the savage Thirty Years War, selling provisions from her rickety wagon to whichever side is winning. In Bertolt Brecht's 1939 play, "Mother Courage and her Children," at the Antaeus Company, she is a woman stripped to her most primal instincts - the impulses to survive and to protect her children. She got the name "Mother Courage" not for her virtue but for her grit.

How easy it would be to stage this as an "idea play," the kind of thing that's good for you, like liver, but that is too cerebral to evoke a gut reaction. Director Andrew J. Robinson avoids that trap by staging a production that is, above all, about real people in desperate circumstances. And he wisely resists the urge to draw overt connections to contemporary politics; the reality of the 17th-century religious conflict that decimated the population of Europe provides enough drama.

Anne Gee Byrd has blue eyes that pierce her customers like lances. Her Mother Courage is fierce, funny and profane. When another character speaks, it's impossible to take your eyes off her - she even listens with intensity. Byrd's performance invests the play with emotion, but without a drop of sentimentality. And she elicits fine support, notably Bruce French as a suitor, and a touching Emily Eiden as Anna's speechless daughter.

The other star of this production is Antaeus' rough-hewn warehouse space. This is theater at its most transparent, with only the costume rack separating the audience from the dressing room. John Iacovelli's set design consists of a wagon like a Pandora's box. As Anna grows more alone, her wagon is less a source of wonder and more of a burden; it's the weight we drag when we choose to stay alive.

MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN

Our rating: ★★★★★

Where: The Antaeus Company, 4916 Vineland Ave., North Hollywood.

When: 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, 5 p.m. Sunday; through May 22.

Tickets: \$20 to \$25. Call (818) 506-5436, or (866) 811-4111.

In a nutshell: Anne Gee Byrd is an electrifying Mother Courage in this stripped-down production.