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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