

Swift communal effort created a refuge to give Antaeus Company a site to house its latest work.

By DINAH ENG
Special to *The Times*

THE stage floor of the Antaeus Company production of Bertolt Brecht's "Mother Courage and Her Children" has a crossroads painted in its center, not unlike the place where things stand for the classical theater troupe, which is losing its home at the NewPlace Theatre Center in North Hollywood.

The fact that the production, scheduled to run through June 12, is taking place at all in the rustic space of what was once a roofing supply warehouse on the theater property is a story of persistence and determination in the face of financial uncertainty.

The company, beginning its 15th season, moved into its current location with hopes that the warehouse on the property would become a 99-seat theater for the ensemble. Instead, lack of funding pushed productions into a 43-seat theater next door, and the warehouse became a space for workshops, readings and get-togethers.

Now the property, owned by Antaeus Company founder Dakin Matthews, has been sold, and the company, which plans to be out of the theater at the end of this year, is starting to look for a new home.

"When we talked about doing 'Mother Courage,' we knew we needed to make some splash with this production to survive and make the next step," says John Apicella, co-artistic director of the company, who stars as the Recruiting Officer and the Chaplain in the play. "[Fellow co-artistic director] Jeanie Hackett said, 'Why not do it in the warehouse?' It was an insane idea."

Insane because for the last three years, the warehouse had become a storage bin of odds and ends, lumber, paint and theater junk, covered with layers of dust. The place was filled with hundreds of shoring wall beams, and the entire east wall was missing. But as the artistic directors and actors agreed, it was the perfect raw, rough-hewn space in which to stage an antiwar play set during the Thirty Years' War in Europe.



ELAINA MCBROOM *The Antaeus Company*

ONE-TIME USE: Anne Gee Byrd, Harry Groener in "Mother Courage." *It's the only play that will be staged in the warehouse.*

Acting Managing Director Holly Harter crunched the numbers, declared the situation a nightmare and proceeded to knock on doors for help. She talked to representatives in the mayor's office, Councilman Tom LaBonge's office, the Community Redevelopment Agency, the Midtown NoHo Neighborhood Council and other city agencies to figure out how to make the insane idea work.

One by one, city officials signed on to the effort, and in a mere five weeks, permits were in place to proceed with a temporary "special event" on the premises.

"We needed to be in by the beginning of March, so people moved mountains to help us," Harter says. "Here we are a little theater that doesn't make much money at all, and the city really worked to help us pull this off."

Jonathan Brand, assistant planning deputy in LaBonge's office, listened to Harter and Hackett's pleas, visited the space on a rainy day in January and decided to lend a hand.

"It was a very complicated situation to get a special event permit," Brand says. "They wanted to use an old storage facility that uniquely fit into the context of the play, which is not something we often see. If you want a permanent change of use from one facility to another, that process needs a public hearing and can take a half year or more."

But the fact that the theater group only wanted a permit for six weeks opened the door for finding a way to achieve the goal.

Officials from the building and safety and fire departments looked at the electrical needs, plumbing, exits and everything in between.

Businesses pitch in

AFTER getting the permits, Harter went to work soliciting donations from area merchants. A storage facility in North Hollywood offered a space for three months to keep what would be cleared out of the warehouse. To move the stuff, a rental company donated a truck.

Members of the company and its academy members came on weekends to clean out the place, discarding set pieces that were no longer viable and setting aside gems that could be used in "Mother Courage."

"We had a Tina Turner stage that had been used several years ago. When she finished a tour, someone left it behind on the airport tarmac, and one of our board members rescued it," Apicella says. "Now it's part of the risers for 'Mother Courage.'"

A lot of scenic flats and elements were used to set up the missing east wall of the building, and contractor Billy Briggs demolished a retaining wall, built a fence and installed an electrical system for well under cost.

Group members constructed dressing tables and corrugated metal alcoves in two corners of the room that give actors privacy between scenes. One local artist painted an exterior mural, an-

'Mother Courage and Her Children'

Where: NewPlace Theatre Center, 4900 N. Vineland Ave., North Hollywood

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 5 p.m. Sundays

Ends: June 12

Price: \$20 to \$25

Contact: (866) 811-4111, (818) 506-5436

other did signage on Vineland Avenue, and Entertainment Lighting Services of Sun Valley loaned a \$6,000 lighting system gratis to the company.

"There are so many small theaters in Los Angeles, and they're all struggling in one way or another," says Jason Mullen, sales manager for ELS. "It's important that local businesses support them. We support small theaters because that's where you see new work and art really thriving."

Hollywood Tentworks lent heaters so the company could work on the warehouse and rehearse at night. The Mark Taper Forum granted access to its costume department. Even the chairs for the audience were donated by two stores, which advertise in the program that if you like the chair you're sitting on, you can buy it after the show closes.

After all the moving, cleaning, painting and construction, the warehouse has become an intimate theater with a European feel, putting the audience in a surround-sound environment.

"We have a lot of good memories in this space," says Apicella, who notes the irony that "Mother Courage" will be the first and last public work performed in the warehouse of dreams. "There's not sufficient parking for a 99-seat theater, so it's imperative that we find something new."

Pausing, he adds, "There's something very rustic and human about this place. But the Antaeus Company is the people in it, and that transcends any building we happen to be in. We're enjoying the opportunity to do one big thing in the warehouse, and I can't think of a better way to say goodbye to a place that's been our home for so long."