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**CRITICS'
CHOICE**

'Mother' remains relevant

■Antaeus Company takes on Bertolt Brecht's 1939 masterpiece and runs with it.

If only the relevance of "Mother Courage and Her Children" were passé. Alas, Bertolt Brecht's 1939 masterpiece about the costs of peace in a war-driven world is more topical than ever. And, when executed by a company in step with Brecht's anti-complacency tactics, "Mother Courage" is stunning theater as well. That is the case at New Place Theater Center, where Antaeus Company takes on this warhorse and runs with it.



'Mother Courage and Her Children'
(Elaina McBroom)

The ticket table sits between a soup kitchen setup and a twinkling pavilion, instantly realizing Brecht's societal poles. The warehouse space suggests a barn-raising left unfinished, courtesy of designer John Iacovelli. Actors stroll about in Michele K. Short's earthen 17th century costumes; others are at makeup tables behind the wardrobe racks that frame the playing area. Alicia Wollerton's accordionist noodles, Ellen Monocroussos' lighting goes to one bulb, Janellen Steininger's narrator enters, and a 30-year's war for the ages ensues.

Director Andrew J. Robinson outdoes himself, keeping the delivery satirical and the stakes bayonet-sharp. His design team is seamless, everyone on the same tragicomic page. The actors form an elemental ensemble, grounded by Anne Gee Byrd's astounding title profiteer. Her raucous attack reminds us that Brecht wanted Ethel Merman to play the role. To see her laser-beam eyes slowly fade at one loss after another to the military economy is to witness a definitive performance.

Byrd's brilliance sparks her colleagues, many of them double-cast. At the reviewed performance, Harry Groener's cook, John Apicella's chaplain, Gigi Birmingham's trollop and Ralph Drischell's doddering colonel were especially vital. Matthew Jaeger and Tim Venable make apt sons, and the mute daughter of Katy Tyszkiewicz is deeply affecting. So goes this raw-boned rendition, the strongest Antaeus outing yet.

--David C. Nichols

"Mother Courage and Her Children," Warehouse Complex, New Place Theatre Center, 4900 N. Vineland Ave., North Hollywood. 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 5 p.m. Sundays. Ends May 22. \$20-\$25. (866) 811-4111. Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes.