

A comment on Brecht in Los Angeles

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11 May 2005

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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

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