Mother Courage and Her Children

(Venice Theater Complex
65 seats, $25 top)

An Antaeus Company presentation of a
play in two acts by Bertolt Brecht. English
version written by Eric Bentley, music by
Paul Dessau, libretto by Kurt Weill and Jan
Pouwet. Directed by Andrew J. Robinson. Sets,
John Iacovelli; lighting, Ellen Monocenous;
costumes, Michele K. Short; production stage
manager, Young Jr.; musical director, Jan
Pouwet. Opened, reviewed April 14, 2005; runs
through May 22. Running time: 2 HOURS, 30 MIN.
The Narrator.

Peasant Women .................. Janellen Steingenier
The Recruiting Officer.
The Chaplain ....................... John Apecella
The Sergeant, The Lieutenant.
A Soldier .......................... Josh Clark
Mother Courage ................... Anne Gee Byrd
Eiltf, A Soldier ..................... Matthew Jaeger
Swiss Cheese, A Soldier .......... Tim Venable
Katrin .............................. Katy Tyszkievicz
The Cook ............................ Harry Groener
The Swedish Commander.
A Soldier, A Clerk ................ Terry Evans
A Soldier, A Peasant ............. Adam Meyer
Yvette .............................. Gigi Bermingham
The Colonel, The Old Peasant ... Ralph Dreschell
An Officer, A Soldier .......... Eugene Aper

By JOEL HIRSCHHORN

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hat we could use around here is a good war,” declares
a sergeant (Josh Clark) in the Antaeus adaptation of Bertolt
Brecht’s 1939 antiwar classic.

“Peace is one big waste of equipment.” With these succinct re-
marks, Brecht announces his inten-
tion to analyze and condemn war
through irony, bitter comedy and
dark drama. Brecht’s structure
remains unwieldy and didactic,
with political attitudes floated
out like balloons, but Andrew J.
Robinson’s sympathetic and in-
tense direction creates many tragic
and memorable moments.

Framed by a 65-seat ware-
house, the production feels popu-
lated and closed in at the same
time — a tribute to Robinson’s intricate
blocking. His depiction of the Thir-
ty Years’ War that transpired in
17th century Sweden, Germany and
Bavaria is authentic, matched by the
reality of Michele K. Short’s appro-
priately shabby costumes.

Mother Courage (Anne Gee
Byrd) is a maddeningly complex
character: The more we attempt to
define her, the more elusive she
becomes. A woman who dislikes
peace because it’s bad for business,
yet hates war because it may de-
stroy her children, she must temper
her rigid defiance with vulnera-

bility and charm. Byrd’s interpretation
is short on the necessary shadings,
but she forcefully projects the char-
acter’s toughness and monomani-
cal determination to sell her goods
and haggle for the highest price.

Her two sons, Eiltf (Matthew
Jaeger) and Swiss Cheese (Tim Ven-
able), and speech-impaired daughter
Katrin (Katy Tyszkievicz) present
different problems: Eiltf is attracted
to battle and relishes murdering
peasants for food, a tendency that
works in wartime and seals his doom
during a brief period of peace. Swiss
Cheese displays the opposite side of
humanity as a peasant, protecting
the regimental cash box and dying
for his integrity. Katrin stands up to
soldiers, pounding a drum to warn
peasants of impending danger and
sacrificing herself in the process.

Jaeger gives Eiltf a blind, poignant
eagerness. His character represents
one of Brecht’s most painfully reso-
nant points: Government-sanctioned
killing is a virtue in war, and a mon-
trous crime the minute the fighting

scene in which she refuses to pay
enough money to save Swiss Cheese’s
life, belief in her maternal devotion
dissipates. If Byrd had projected bot-
tomless despair and agony more con-
vincingly, it would have made us
sympathize with her, but the moment
is too understated and subtle.

John Apecella excels as the chap-
lain who wants to marry Mother
Courage, and Gigi Bermingham con-
tributes a colorful portrait of a cal-
culating prostitute.

The standout is Harry Groener as
combination cook and ladies’ man.
Groener adds a mood of mischief
and joy to the surrounding starkness.

Most of the other cast members
sing the interpolated, cleverly cynic-
ical songs adequately, compensating
with the span of skill for any vocal
shortcomings. Groener’s voice beau-
ifully blends attitude with vocal tal-
ent, and the climactic collision
— when he invites Mother Courage
to run an inn he has inherited on
the condition she leave Katrin behind
— is superbly played.

The final moment, as Mother
Courage, having lost everything,
drags her wagon across the stage
and says, “I must get back to busi-
ness,” is staged with eerie effective-
ness, reinforcing Brecht’s reminder
that the need to survive ultimately
outstrips every other consideration.