



REVIEWS

Mother Courage and Her Children

The Theatre @ Boston Court

October 29 - November 27, 2005

Friday, November 04, 2005

Pasadena Star and U-Entertainment

EXPLORING THE PRICE OF WAR

By Frances Bam Nicholson

If done as originally intended, a Bertold Brecht play is a challenge. Brecht believed in separating his audience from his material - in denying them the emotional satisfaction of the suspension of disbelief - in order to be sure they got the point of his often stark and bitter plots. He eschewed sets for signs, left the lights on in the audience, and developed scene introductions, which read like the chapter headings in a Dickens novel.

Now, in a new, almost ferocious production of David Hare's ("Stuff Happens") translation of Brecht's great "Mother Courage" at the Theatre @ Boston Court in Pasadena, director Jessica Kubzansky compromises between the playwright's stark original concept and the potential of modern dramatic form. By using dance and sound and space, the audience is wrapped in Brecht's storyline, and ironically more engaged with the point of his play: that those whose energy is spent profiting from war will lose all, even as war perpetuates itself. Camille Saviola's brilliant, tough, practical rendition of the title character knits the episodic tale together, managing to acquire the audience's sympathy without becoming tragic even in the midst of tragedy. The result proves both Brechtian and brave.

Mother Courage is a practical woman whose desire to simply get through the war with her children is balanced by her need to make a living off the very war that eventually takes all of them away from her. What she never acknowledges, but what the audience must, is the overwhelming irony of finding one's personal comforts from the offal of violence without expecting to be overwhelmed by the violence itself.

Joining Saviola in bringing about Kubzansky's three-dimensional, deeply sensory vision, an energetic and versatile cast brings to life the wide variety of characters who people Mother Courage's journey through the 20 Years War. Seamus Dever, Donn Swaby and most particularly the silent but eloquent Jessica Goldapple give articulate, recognizable humanity to her three children, each swept up in his or her turn by the larger events around them. Hugo Armstrong, as an army cook with similar attitudes, Bernard K. Addison as a chaplain of debatable ethics, and J.Karen Thomas as a woman working the system more sexually than Mother Courage does, stand out in a large and universally talented ensemble. Still, what set this production apart from standard Brecht is the sensory quality of the production itself. War becomes choreography—sometimes graphically violent—beautifully integrated into the piece by Kitty McNamee. The thunder of guns accompanies simple domestic scenes. The music by Randall Tico has the same angular quality one expects in a Brecht piece, and the songs sound as gritty and harsh as the message portrayed.

Brecht, writing between world wars, had much to say, which holds true in our modern society. It is good to see a modern political playwright like Hare give his work fresh voice, and even better to find such a compelling production inviting audiences to see the work anew, for it has never really been old.

Back Stage West

Mother Courage and Her Children

November 03, 2005

By Les Spindle

Bertolt Brecht's prescient 1941 German-language play, set during Europe's Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), was intended as a satiric commentary on World War II. Its hard-hitting themes on the calamitous effects of war--the tearing apart of families, widespread death and destruction, profiteering, hidden political agendas, moral confusion, and sheer madness--now seem more pertinent than ever. Director Jessica Kubzansky's local premiere of David Hare's 1995 translation captures the dark humor, thought-provoking drama, and potent theatricality of the idiosyncratic Brechtian style. She delivers a stirring rendition of one of the 20th century's most challenging classics.

Her most inspired choice was in the casting of the titular character--part Earth Mother and part *Mommie Dearest*. The gifted Camille Saviola commands the stage as the ruthlessly enterprising matriarch, who pushes her cart of food and supplies behind the European battle fronts, prepared to prevail over anyone who gets in her or her children's way. Saviola's instincts are spot-on in making this Everywoman a paradoxical amalgam of foibles and strengths, humor and pathos, in her determined quest for survival. She belts out declamatory songs powerfully and infuses Hare's text with scintillating wit and irony.

The lithe and energetic Seamus Dever as her brash son Eilif, an army recruit seeking glory, likewise explores the story's moral ambiguities in a sensitive and finely nuanced portrayal. Donn Swaby excels as the younger son Swiss Cheese, who dies as a result of his honesty. Jessica Goldapple masters the difficult role of the mute sibling Katrin; Goldapple's face eloquently expresses the living hell through which the well-meaning Mother Courage puts her children. Other splendid work comes from J. Karen Thomas as the resourceful prostitute Yvette, Hugo Armstrong as the sardonic Cook, and Bernard K. Addison as the opportunistic deposed Chaplain.

Kitty McNamee provides superlative choreography, especially in the chilling battle sequences. Also supporting Kubzansky's compelling vision are Randall Tico's haunting original music, Susan Gratch's strikingly eerie scenic design, Jeremy Pivnick's beautifully textured lighting, Audrey Fisher's appropriately timeless costumes, and John Zalewski's magnificent sound effects. In a busy year for local Brecht revivals, Kubzansky's artful interpretation demonstrates why Mother Courage remains a play for all seasons.

LA Weekly

MOTHER COURAGE

By setting his saga 300 years back during the Thirty Years War, Bertolt Brecht cloaked his forebodings about the Third Reich's sway over its civilians. Director Jessica Kubzansky aptly notes the piece's deliberate timelessness (war profiteer Mother Courage cradles her shillings tighter to her chest than her children), as there will always be warmonger kings who trumpet God's will while retreating to their bank vaults. Mother Courage (Camille Saviola) has a more humane face than Halliburton (and what a tremendous, granite face Saviola has). Yet perhaps fearful of crossing Brecht's signature "alienation effect," Kubzansky shies away

from investing her actors with much emotion at all. Mother Courage needs to be pulled by both family and finance, with the more powerful finance tugging so strongly she eventually drags her cart of wares alone. Lacking an ideological struggle, this very stylish production portrays her only as a simple juggernaut, well-captured in Saviola's fleshy, forthright voice and David Hare's raw, gripping translation. Supporting players J. Karen Thomas as a prostitute and Hugo Armstrong's Cook best ground their caricatures inside Brecht's universe, strikingly realized in Susan Gratch's set, Randall Tico's original music, and John Zalewishi's sound design of hornets, calculators and pocket change. Theater@Boston Court, 70 N. Mentor Ave., Pasadena; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. (no perf Nov. 24); thru Nov. 27. (626) 683-6883. **Written 11/03/2005** (Amy Nicholson)

Pasadena Weekly

Thursday, November 17, 2005

"Mother Courage"

In the current political climate, there's been criticism about the hyenas of war, those who circle around the misery of others, looking for a mercenary angle so they can laugh their way to the bank. What better time to revive Bertolt Brecht's "Mother Courage and Her Children?" Under the direction of Jessica Kubzansky, the Theatre @ Boston Court production livens up the original text (translated by David Hare) with a heavy, aggressive beat and original music by Randall Tico and choreography by Kitty McNamee, making this a darkly vivid musical.

Bertolt Brecht wrote this play in 1939 as an attempt to protest the rise of Fascism and Nazism in his homeland, but set this political drama during the Central European Thirty Years' War between the Protestants and the Catholics in the early 17th century.

Kubzansky doesn't allow the message here to be strident nor will she allow us to leave these words in the refuse of World War II. Tico's music and Audrey Fisher's costume design occasionally bring us into contemporary times. Susan Gratch's scenic design is minimal: a bare stage with a gigantic tree that instead of leaves, has limbs hanging from it.

Nicknamed Mother Courage (Camille Saviola) a wily canteen woman follows the Swedish Army trying to make money off of the war in any way she can. Along with her, she has her children: Swiss Cheese (Donn Swaby), Eilif (Seamus Deaver) and Katrin (Jessica Goldapple).

A big-boned, heavysset woman, Saviola exudes a toughness that is given an earthy flair. Deaver's Eilif has a dynamic physical appearance and an angry restlessness which sharply contrasts with Swaby's laid-back, simple-minded Swiss Cheese. Goldapple as the mute daughter has no lines but physically expresses her sorrow and eventual hopelessness. Her fragility and hesitant bravery counters Saviola's swagger and bluster.

Brecht's play asks: At what cost does one survive a war? And by attempting to profit from death and destruction, who does one destroy?

The nearly three hours swiftly pass, and the message Brecht sent out to the world in 1939 remains powerful and timely today.

"Mother Courage and Her children" continues through Nov. 27 at 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays and

3 p.m. Sundays. The Theatre at Boston Court is located at 70 N Mentor Avenue, Pasadena. Tickets are \$30 general admission, or \$25 for students and seniors. Call (626) 683-6883, or visit www.bostoncourt.org

Variety

By Terry Morgan

The awful power and prescience of Bertolt Brecht's "Mother Courage and Her Children" is that at no time since its first performance in 1941 has it been irrelevant: There are always conflicts, always victims, always someone simply trying to survive. The Theater@Boston Court's production of the play, featuring the L.A. premiere of a translation by David Hare is steeped in this awareness of the omnipresence of war. Director Jessica Kubzansky falters in an attempt to shoehorn an avant-garde visual style into the piece -- actors in military uniform dancing to discoesque music between scenes -- but she succeeds in getting sterling perfs from an excellent cast.

Camille Saviola is superb as Mother Courage, a hard-nosed canteen-cart owner trying to keep herself and her three children alive during the Thirty Years War.

Her interpretation of the role is more tough love than calculating profiteer, and her final scenes are heartbreaking in the simplicity and power of her acting. She also has a commanding singing voice, and her rendition of "The Song of the Great Capitulation" is appropriately fierce and rueful.

Portraying her children, Seamus Dever is believably tough as Eilif, and Donn Swaby is convincingly guileless as Swiss Cheese, but it's Jessica Goldapple's tragic Katrin that sticks in the memory. Bereft of as much as a single line, her performance is a triumph of feeling, as in a quietly effective scene where the naive Katrin romanticizes a whore's story, preening and childishly glorying in the feeling of being pretty and wanted, if only for a moment.

Hugo Armstrong demonstrates a gruff charm as the Cook, and he imbues his fine performance of "The Song of the Great Persons of This Earth" with a desperate anger.

J. Karen Thomas and Bernard K. Addison are good as the prostitute Yvette and the Chaplain, respectively, but Hare's translation seems to have removed some of the subtlety from their characters.

Audrey Fisher's costumes are densely layered, adding a sense of reality to the sometimes surreal production -- a tree with arms and legs dangling from its branches works hard at being symbolic at center-stage.

John Zalewski's sound design uses the clever conceit of rattling coin noises to represent a range of things from commerce to death, but the recorded music for songs is played so loudly that the singers often can't be heard over it.

Sets, Susan Gratch; costumes, Audrey Fisher; lighting, Jeremy Pivnick; sound, John Zalewski; production stage manager, Susan Lang. Opened, reviewed Oct. 29, 2005; runs through Nov. 27. Running time: 2 HOURS, 45 MIN.

Ensemble: Nick Hoffa, Adam Donshik, Joshua Wolf Coleman, Derek King, Rufino Cabang, Andrew Amani, Patrick Flanagan, Matt Foyer, Lexi Pearl, Liz Young.

Los Angeles Times

THEATER REVIEW

War defies time in 'Mother Courage'

By Daryl H. Miller

Times Staff Writer

November 4, 2005

One by one, her children are swept into war. She mourns their involvement but won't renounce the fighting, for it is her livelihood. Following the army, she scavenges what she can from the battle-ravaged land and sells it to whomever will buy.

The title character of Bertolt Brecht's "Mother Courage and Her Children" is a mother in the literal sense, yes, but she also represents a force or a nation or perhaps even an entire planet that simply cannot resist the call of war. The work communicates with renewed vigor in a vivid production by the Theatre @ Boston Court.

The exiled German playwright set his tale during the Thirty Years' War of the 1600s, but with the Nazi machine advancing across Europe as he wrote it, he clearly meant his nightmarish parable to be applicable to all conflicts past, present and future.

Jessica Kubzansky's staging - based on a fresh and urgent mid-1990s translation by David Hare - embraces this sense of timelessness. Video projections crackle like lightning while soldiers in olive drabs shimmy down ladders, as though raining from the sky. Civilians in peasant garb stumble across the devastated landscape, symbolized by a lifeless tree hung with ghostly, dismembered limbs.

As Mother Courage, Camille Saviola is wily, indomitable and eminently practical. Though she tries to protect her children - crafty but hotheaded Eilif (Seamus Dever), guileless Swiss Cheese (Donn Swaby) and dutiful, quietly brave Kattrin (Jessica Goldapple) - from the fighting, she remains firm and impassive when sacrifices must be made.

The story functions like a folk tale, and Kubzansky evokes its desolate beauty in collaboration with composer Randall Tico and designers Susan Gratch (set), Jeremy Pivnick (lights), Audrey Fisher (costumes) and Shaun Fillion (video). Between-scene military maneuvers — choreographed by Kitty McNamee — are punctuated with salutes and executed with gung-ho grins. John Zalewski supplies a soundscape of moaning wind, scraping metal and the clink of money changing hands.

The nearly three-hour length is daunting, but when a show gives you this much to think about, the result is as energizing as it is exhausting.

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'Mother Courage and Her Children'

Where: Boston Court, 70 N. Mentor Ave., Pasadena

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays

Ends: Nov. 27

Price: \$30

Contact: (626) 683-6883 or www.bostoncourt.org

Running time: 2 hours, 50 minutes

Flavorpill

Now more than ever, Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage* offers poignant commentary on man's obsession with war. Despite its 17th-century setting, the show remains relevant, eliciting unintentional parallels between the Thirty Years' War and our current conflict in Iraq. Camille Saviola's heroic portrayal of *Mother Courage*, a woman torn between her revulsion of bloodletting and her desire to capitalize upon it, lays bare the tragic irony of war. Neither the company, nor the play itself pulls any punches; both are straightforward, providing theatre that provokes a compelling social discourse. (ASM)