

# University Theatre's 'Good Woman of Setzuan' opening tomorrow

"People whistled, shrieked, boomed, applauded. The actress on stage jumped onto the piano and began banging the keys with her feet. The noise grew deafening....Then applause started, rose to a climax, and the

By JOHN LOEBER

performance went on," according to observers during the opening of a play by Bertolt Brecht in 1926. It has been over 40 years

since Brecht's work incited riots and almost four since it's been played at the University Theatre—and while a riot is doubtful, a production of his "Good Woman of Setzuan" will open Feb. 13 and run Feb. 14 and 18-21.

To call Brecht an unusual playwright is a statement absurd in itself—Brecht is a consuming writer, totally unable to accept the art of yesterday as the voice of today, thereby creating statements so polemic as to incite pas-

sion in the most conservative audiences.

"Comprehension," said Kandinsky, the Russian impressionist painter, "is educating the spectator to the point of view of the artist." This is just the case in Brecht's theatre and since his work first drew attention it has become dramatic convention, a style aptly followed by University Theatre director Chi-Mei Wang in "Good Woman," the story of three gods searching for a good human being, the alternative being the end of the world. They do eventually find such a person, a prostitute, but their gifts cause her more anguish than succor, "I can't tell how it was," she says, "but to be good to others and myself at the same time, I could do it not."

At the end of the play the three gods blindly judge the world good and leave it as is: cruel, unjust, and unchanged, where the good cannot live and stay good. This might well stand as one definition of Brecht's theatre, for as he once said, "Show the world in a critical spirit—and the audience will automatically see the need for a Marxist solution."

Yes, Brecht was, above all else, a communist—and in the Germany of the 20's and 30's a rabid anti-Nazi. He was actually so politically unpopular among the Fascists that in 1923 he rose to

number five on Hitler's death list, and was eventually stripped of his citizenship and forced to flee his homeland. On the eve of World War II he took a somewhat less didactic stance and while exiled in Denmark wrote a number of plays, including "Good Woman of Setzuan," which was co-authored by Margarite Steffin.

In his work, which he called epic theatre, the non-literary elements, the *mise-en-scene*—decor, music, dance—were independent and stood apart from the narrative. In this new art of awakening audiences to thought rather than staging realism or re-creation, audiences should expect to see lighting instruments, musicians, and mechanical devices revealed. Another great playwright of the time, Antonin Artaud, said, "The stage is a concrete physical place which asks to be filled, and to be given its own concrete language to speak...In the true theatre a play disturbs the senses' response, frees the repressed unconscious, incites a kind of virtual revolt." This gives a good description of the epic theatre of Brecht, a theatre which unfolds as a series of episodes, each building on the next without climax, rather than the more familiar three or five act climactic structure of dramatic theatre.

Even the acting is unlike standard theatre fare. Instead of merging with the character, the Brechtian actor finds inner life irrelevant and replaces human nature and fixed characterization with human relations and avoid-

dance of illusion. The actors stand outside their roles, cool, relaxed, and ironical with everything depending on the story. Thus epic theatre tries to denounce illusion and prefers to provide an audience with a historical report of events. But in "Good Woman," as in most of Brecht's plays, the propaganda value of his work is swallowed up by the artistry and audiences stubbornly insist on being moved emotionally. "He doesn't really say to change," says director Wang, "but asks if change is possible, could there be a solution." She feels "Good Woman" presents a more mature Brecht than shown in his earlier, riotous work; a Brecht who finds the theory of theatre the theory of comedy, giving the audience an opportunity to stand outside the event, and through laughter realize it is part of the scene.

If Wang's direction is as good as her intentions this University Theatre presentation will indeed be memorable. "Instead of giving the words to think about, I'll give the senses to feel," Wang says.

One of the most memorable lines in the play reads: "A caress becomes a stranglehold, a sign of love turns to a cry of fear, why are there vultures circling in the air? A girl is going to meet her lover." Wang says of it, "I don't want to limit the audience's reaction to it. When something is this strong the audience has a right to their own interpretation. We don't need to give them one. The audience has intelligence and the ability to react." \*



Jenny Neilsen and Susan Scoull

Photos by Greg Clark



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