

'We should excuse these theatre folk'

To begin with I should be clear in saying I didn't like the University Theatre production of Bertolt Brecht's "The Good Woman of Setzuan," but as Brecht himself has said, "In any case we should excuse these theatre folk, for the pleasures they sell for money and fame could not be induced by an exacter representation of the world, nor could their inexact renderings be presented in a less magical way."

By JOHN LOEBER

There are some fine moments in the play, most notably Ric Hagerman's delivery as Wong the water seller and Johnal Woodward's miming, which is a welcome relief from the forced action found in the rest of the play. The two alter egos of the central character, Shen Te and Shui Ta, are merged quite effectively by Jenny Nielsen as the play progresses, showing the duality of goodness. (Although when she mimes leading her young son around the stage it plays more as dragging a toy duck around a track—the mime here is purely Occidental.)

But most of this careful work is obviated by the characterization provided by Susan Scovil as the landlady and John Pattison as the barber. The landlady is overacted and presents enthusiasm where suspicion is called for during the first scene, and is later played as catty rather than haughty, thereby turning scene into melodrama and giving the audience too easy a way of thinking about the action. Most succinctly, the greedy and suspicious Oriental landlady is played as a blowzy Mae West. The barber's identity is also obviously a characterization the actor has put on for the evening's work, developing salaciousness where avarice is called for and outrunning any sense of inner motivation. Where is the free and easy ironic acting Brecht falls for?

The blocking is forced throughout the play, with characters shifting emphasis so often the only feeling left is of obscure attempts to upstage the action inherent in the play.

Scene changes—the script calls for over a dozen—are rushed through so quickly any sense of suspended time called for in epic drama is entirely lost. The attempt to recapture this feeling of potential energy rather than inertia comes during the scenes and appears as fault rather than intent, upsetting the play's rhythms. The result is a slow production.

Overall, the sense of irony and alienation Brecht calls for is achieved—but not so much by good drama as by faulty craftsmanship. The lighting is incredibly unbalanced, dropping drastically at the stage perimeters where much of the action takes place, and presents several blue hot spots which do little justice to the already unctuous makeup seen on several of the actors. The acting too emphatically corners the audience into an understanding of what is happening and who is guilty.

With so many aspects of the play failing, the audience's sense of futility in judgement is lost, and any sense of reflection is centered on romantic symbolism: the tobacco shop owned by Shui Ta is the counterpart of love and goodness, and the airplanes and vultures seen by Shen Te are unattainable love turned to unhappiness. But in the midst of melodrama the direct attacks Brecht makes on materialism are lost in emotional reactions.

Failing as epic theatre, this production of "The Good Woman of Setzuan" leaves the audience too firmly entrenched in a melodramatic understanding of guilt and innocence, never truly approaching the questions: is wickedness necessary to maintain existence; can humans exist without hunger and desire, and does anyone have the right to judge? *

The 15-year-old has grown up



Janis Ian will appear tonight in concert with Loudon Wainwright III at 8:30 in Mac Court. Tickets for the Cultural Forum/Double Tee event are \$4 for students, \$5 general and \$5.50 at the door.

I learned the truth at seventeen — that love was meant for beauty queens and high school girls with clear-skinned smiles who married young and then retired...

—Janis Ian
"At Seventeen"

When I was 12 and knew so well it made me sick what Janis Ian apparently didn't realize until she was 17 and didn't sing about until now, my father brought me home her first album—a "reject" from the University radio station.

I listened to it and immediately liked the anti-racist "Society's

Child," for a part of my budding consciousness loved anything that smacked of rebellion.

But sometime through the years and somewhere along the way, the album was misplaced. Maybe if I'd known that many years later

By JENIFER BLUMBERG

Janis Ian would become a big-deal recording artist, I'd have kept the album as proof that "I knew then what everyone else knows now." Maybe, but I don't think so.

I get the feeling that Ian is not so interested anymore in "smacking of rebellion." She's selling lots of records today; she was even on the "big shot" *Johnny Carson Show* recently, singing her beautiful love song "Jesse."

Yes, the lady can write songs, and she can sing; she's also learned what sells and what doesn't. The 15-year-old girl of "Society's Child" days has grown. Ian has toned down her subject matter—or just obscured it—and become acceptable to the masses.

*Bright lights & promises
A pocket full of dreams
That's what they pay me to be*
—Janis Ian
"Bright Lights & Promises" *



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