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Courage: Moving, beyond emotion

If you cry during the musical-cum-anti-war theatrical experience that is Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*, something has gone awry. And despite the emotionally grounded acting in the Lord Leebrick's production of this challenging piece, the audience leaves more bemused than drained.

Brecht would probably approve.

The German playwright — who was heartily hated and sometimes hounded by the Nazis in the 1930s, the U.S. House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1940s and even the Stasi after he ended up in East Berlin — specifically did *not* want the audience to feel too much emotion about the illusion onstage. In his scripts, he disrupts the fourth wall with devices such as characters announcing the content of scenes in advance; nearly surreal song-and-dance routines; and a bare stage with few props. That makes theater obviously an illusion and, Brecht hoped, would make the audience think critically about the experience — not simply *feel*.

One device was to focus on distant history; Brecht didn't want audiences to have the distraction of memory. So the 1939-penned *Mother Courage* spans a decade and a half of the Thirty Years' War (1616-1648), a time when opposing Catholic and Protestant forces tore Europe apart. But the play, as anti-war as it is — showing that in war, the greedy often profit, the clever and cruel do well, the honest and brave and righteous wind up dead — also scores points about the straits of working-class people trying to survive in a world as heartless in peacetime as at war.

Mother Courage, one of those working-class folks, makes her money as a supplier of troops. She trades and sells shamelessly as she strives to keep her three children and herself from harm. But her focus on selling goods and keeping her wagon full inevitably leads her children into harm's way. In the end, as Jonathan Dove's Kurt Weill-ish sounding song tells us early on, she's the only one left.

This character stands at the center of the drama, and she remains onstage nearly 100 percent of the two hour and 40 minute running time. In that role, Judith "Sparky" Roberts, LCC legend and the energy behind many Shakespearean productions, must anchor the messy, slow script (as translated by British playwright David Hare); for the most part, she does it well.

Yet despite her obvious skill and her excellent presentation of Act II's anchoring song, "The Great Capitulation," Roberts, whose occasional oddly timed pauses seemed to indicate some line memory issues, doesn't comfortably inhabit her character. She's simply too nice, and *Mother Courage* certainly isn't nice. As Courage's would-be paramour, Richard Leebrick sprawls edgily through the action of the Cook (though his overacting gets out of hand in Act III). Roberts' LCC compatriot, Patrick Tourelle, enacts the deracinated Chaplain with solid humor. And Courage's three children, played by Dean Van, Chip Sherman and Barbie Wu, perform their almost morality-play parts with solid focus. Wu especially shines in a non-speaking role, making her final moment of real courage appear all the more poignant. Some members of the ensemble, including the talented musicians, add facets of humor and depth to the production.

But the final scene closes with weak actors surrounding Roberts. The audience, after taking time to do some of that critical thinking Brecht advocated, can only hope and believe that director Craig Willis hasn't made an unusual casting error. Instead, perhaps, he and the actors follow the spirit of Brecht and strive to alienate the audience. Nothing in the play is more alienating than the disjuncture between Roberts' agonized song over a huge loss and the awkward line delivery of the others in that last scene. An internal door slams on every audience member longing for emotional catharsis: Heartbreak? Denied.

That denial lies at the heart of *Mother Courage* and makes the audience think: Does the play tell us war is never-ending and peace is illusory? That everyone grasps and everyone fails? That great personal sacrifice means nothing to the world? Or maybe that art can make us analyze but can't replace our political will to change?

In his notes, Willis writes that Brecht "wanted to defamiliarize familiar things like motherhood." Indeed, the character of Mother Courage represents the kind of mother Anjelica Huston played in *The Grifters*: unsentimental and determined. Roberts as Courage must leave her own kindness behind in order to make this production more successful. Yet this remains a powerful production offered to the community as a goad for thinking, for dealing with conflicting emotions and for helping us analyze and understand our own wartime choices. **EW**

Mother Courage and Her Children runs through June 3.
Tix available at www.lordleebrick.com or 465-1506.

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