



For ReviewPlays.com, 4/28/05 and
Entertainment Today, 5/20/05

TICKETHOLDERS

by Travis Michael Holder

Mother Courage

Antaeus Ensemble at the NewPlace Theatre

The Antaeus Company's commitment to presenting a faithful production of Bertolt Brecht's 1939 masterpiece *Mother Courage and her Children* began even before America went to war, but the germ of it, the passion to speak out, started as a statement against our country's direction, to be sure. The process began with staged readings, complete with music, just as the guy I laughably refer to as our "leader" was busy smirking and misspeaking as he sent our troops off to Iraq. "We wanted then to do it more than ever, but you know how these things go," Anne Gee Byrd, who offers a galvanizing performance in the title role in Antaeus' mounting of the difficult classic, told me in a recent interview. "But when you're doing something for the right reasons, it all falls into place, doesn't it? I mean, when you want to say something from your heart, things follow."

It was the brainstorm of Antaeus' co-artistic director Jeanie Hackett to stage the production in the abandoned warehouse adjacent to the NewPlace Center, the company's home for the last three years—which they are heartbreakingly being forced to vacate at the end of their current season. Filthy dirty, piled with junk and missing an outer wall, the conversion of the space, from removing hundreds of vertical shoring beams to obtaining city permits, was a journey worthy of *Mother Courage and her Thirty Year War*. Through the hard work and fierce dedication of the company members of Antaeus, however, the seedy old crumbling warehouse has been transformed into an environmental rustic playground, with audience seated on three sides and visible dressing tables near the entrances where actors dress, slap on dusty make-up, bang drums, and whistle in appropriate spots when Brecht calls for a little wind.

The Antaeus production of *Mother Courage*, under the sharp direction of Andrew J. Robinson, is a magnificent achievement, especially the transcendent performance of Byrd in the title role, sure to top the lists of Bests in this year's voting sweepstakes. Her remarkable lead sets the story, sets the mood, sets the raucous and in-your-face course of the material with consummate skill. The ensemble is uniformly up to the task of presenting Brecht's vision, particularly Antaeus co-artistic director John Apicella (alternating with Phil Proctor) as the marginally religious Chaplain; Bruce French (alternating with Harry Groener) as the Cook—Mother's occasional love interest; Terry

(alternating with Harry Groener) as the Cook, Mother's occasional love interest, Terry Evans as the Swedish Commander and other roles; and Tim Venable (alternating with Nathan Patrick) as Mother's not-really-so-stupid "dumb" son Swiss Cheese. The spectacular Gigi Bermingham (alternating with Rhonda Aldrich) is a major standout as the camp-following hooker Yvette, offering a knockout solo with Brecht and Weill's haunting ballad "At 17."

Yes, there is music here as well; the fascinatingly strident tunes of this historical team of writers, as well as songs by Paul Dessau and Hans Eisler, are performed in clear view by the quickly-assembled Antaeus Orchestra. Featuring such nontraditional instruments as accordion, bugle, duduk, didgeridoo and recorder, the band and cast all perform splendidly under the exceptional musical direction of Jan Powell and musical staging created by Harry Groener.

Mother Courage is certainly an important play for our time, here examined with ferocious sincerity by a dynamic artistic team. The message is clear: the cruel insanity of war and the unstoppable quest for power and profit, whether it be Mother's profit from a few shots of homemade brandy or our current administration's immoral aggression in the name of some twisted notion of right and wrong, are meant to leave its audience members both exquisitely entertained and frighteningly reminded of our president's narrow viewpoint, mandated to believe he has permission to commit any kind of atrocity necessary in the name of a god not all Americans chose to recognize. I'd like to think, bottomline, that even a profiteer such as Mother Courage sleeps better at night than he does.

The NewPlace Theatre Center is located at 4900 Vineland Av., NoHo. For tickets, call (866) 811-4111.