

Mother Courage and Her Children

(NewPlace Theater Complex;
65 seats, \$25 top)

An Antaeus Company presentation of a play in two acts by Bertolt Brecht, English version written by Eric Bentley, music by Paul Dessau, Han Eisler, Kurt Weill and Jan Povel. Directed by Andrew J. Robinson. Sets, John Iacovelli; lighting, Ellen Monocrussos; costumes, Michele K. Short; production stage manager, Young Ji; musical director, Jan Powell. Opened, reviewed April 16, 2005; runs through May 22. Running time: 2 HOURS, 30 MIN.

The Narrator
Peasant Women Janelle Steininger
The Recruiting Officer,
The Chaplain John Apicella
The Sergeant, The Lieutenant,
A Soldier Josh Clark
Mother Courage Anne Gee Byrd
Eilif, A Soldier Matthew Jaeger
Swiss Cheese, A Soldier Tim Venable
Katrin Katy Tyszkiewicz
The Cook Harry Groener
The Swedish Commander,
A Soldier, A Clerk Terry Evans
A Soldier, A Peasant Adam Meyer
Yvette Gigi Bermingham
The Colonel,
The Old Peasant Ralph Drischell
An Officer, A Soldier Eugene Alper

By JOEL HIRSCHORN

What we could use around here is a good war," declares a sergeant (Josh Clark) in the Antaeus adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's 1939 antiwar classic. "Peace is one big waste of equipment." With these succinct remarks, Brecht announces his intention to analyze and condemn war through irony, bitter comedy and dark drama. Brecht's structure remains unwieldy and didactic, with political attitudes floated out like balloons, but Andrew J. Robinson's sympathetic and intense direction creates many tragic and memorable moments.

Framed by a 65-seat warehouse, the production feels populated and closed in at the same time — a tribute to Robinson's intricate blocking. His depiction of the Thirty Years' War that transpired in 17th century Sweden, Germany and Bavaria is authentic, matched by the reality of Michele K. Short's appropriately shabby costumes.

Mother Courage (Anne Gee Byrd) is a maddeningly complex character: The more we attempt to define her, the more elusive she becomes. A woman who dislikes peace because it's bad for business, yet hates war because it may de-

VARIETY

FRIDAY, APRIL 22, 2005

LEGIT REVIEW



Anne Gee Byrd, who co-stars with Harry Groener, plays the title role in "Mother Courage," an adaptation of the Bertolt Brecht classic.

stroy her children, she must temper her rigid defiance with vulnerability and charm. Byrd's interpretation is short on the necessary shadings, but she forcefully projects the character's toughness and monomaniacal determination to sell her goods and haggle for the highest price.

Her two sons, Eilif (Matthew Jaeger) and Swiss Cheese (Tim Venable), and speech-impaired daughter Katrin (Katy Tyszkiewicz) present different problems: Eilif is attracted to battle and relishes murdering peasants for food, a tendency that works in wartime and seals his doom during a brief period of peace. Swiss Cheese displays the opposite side of humanity as a paymaster, protecting the regimental cash box and dying for his integrity. Katrin stands up to soldiers, pounding a drum to warn peasants of impending danger and sacrificing herself in the process.

Jaeger gives Eilif a blind, poignant eagerness. His character represents one of Brecht's most painfully resonant points: Government-sanctioned killing is a virtue in war, and a monstrous crime the minute the fighting

stops, a requirement that tears apart the souls of soldiers who must adjust to both demands. Jaeger's portrayal overcomes the fact that Eilif is more symbol than person, while Venable's gentle Swiss Cheese — though acted with soft eloquence — is Brecht demonstrating the risks of taking a moral stand.

The role of Katrin avoids this trap, both in playwriting and acting. Tyszkiewicz can't speak beyond hysterical, guttural noises, but her eyes say everything — frustration at being unloved, terror that she may never marry and have children. Robinson arranges the performers so that we always have a powerful awareness of Katrin, physically and mentally, and her heroic behavior at the climax emphasizes how shallow and self-consumed her mother is by contrast.

This version makes a strong visceral impression through engrossing individual sequences. Its weakness is that Mother Courage and her children don't, at the deepest core, seem to be a true family. We're supposed to believe the mother figure loves her offspring. However, after a shocking

scene in which she refuses to pay enough money to save Swiss Cheese's life, belief in her maternal devotion dissipates. If Byrd had projected bottomless despair and agony more convincingly, it would have made us sympathize with her, but the moment is too understated and subtle.

John Apicella excels as the chaplain who wants to marry Mother Courage, and Gigi Bermingham contributes a colorful portrait of a calculating prostitute.

The standout is Harry Groener as combination cook and ladies' man. Groener adds a mood of mischief and joy to the surrounding starkness.

Most of the other cast members sing the interpolated, cleverly cynical songs adequately, compensating with thespian skill for any vocal shortcomings. Groener's voice beautifully blends attitude with vocal talent, and the climactic collision — when he invites Mother Courage to run an inn he has inherited on the condition she leave Katrin behind — is superbly played.

The final moment, as Mother Courage, having lost everything, drags her wagon across the stage and says, "I must get back to business," is staged with eerie effectiveness, reinforcing Brecht's reminder that the need to survive ultimately outstrips every other consideration.