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THEATER REVIEW 'MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN'

War Shows Its True Colors as Both Friend and Foe

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Brecht called "Mother Courage and Her Children" a chronicle of the Thirty Years' War in Europe. Today encyclopedias divide that bloody 17th-century marathon into periods like the Bohemian Period or the Swedish Period. It is so neat it could be art history. Protestant and Roman Catholic armies battled, dynasties fell, territories changed hands, refugees scattered. When it ended in 1648 more than half the German population was dead.

"Mother Courage" is a great anti-war play. Like war itself, it is brutal yet devious. We are alienated and implicated. We are repelled by much of what we see, but we can't pretend we are astonished. The excellent Classical Theater of Harlem has staged a taut production, through Feb. 29. I hope the run can be extended; this play needs to be seen.

Mother Courage (Gwendolyn Mulamba) is a small-time profiteer who follows the army selling whatever she can: bread, cucumbers, linen, bullets. She earned her name when she drove her supply wagon through the bombardment of Riga "like a madman" lest the 50 loaves of bread she had get moldy.

The stage is a stern gray war zone. (The set is by Troy Hourie, the lighting by Aaron Black.) Mother enters confidently. Her supply wagon looks like a trailer. Her sons Eilif (Leopold Lowe) and Swiss Cheese (Jaime Carrillo) are hitched to it like horses. Her daughter, Katrin (Macchi Aharanwa), who is mute but not deaf, sits inside following orders anxiously.

Everyone Mother meets does whatever they must to get by. When the Catholics conquer Protestant territory, the army Chaplain (an amusingly unctuous Michael Early) hastily changes his religious garb, and Mother switches flags. Yvette (Anna Zastrow), the pretty camp follower, betters her circumstances by snagging a rich old colonel; the Cook (Oberon K. A. Adjepong) lays low.

War is whatever the participants need it to be: land grab, blood bath,



James Rana, left, Jaime Carrillo, Michael Early, and Gwendolyn Mulamba in Mother Courage at the Classical Theatre of Harlem

crusade. In Brecht's hands war is a character, too, with an insidious power to adapt and manipulate. Does Mother Courage protest when her eldest son joins the army? The war becomes a neglected parent who has suffered for ungrateful children: "Your brood should get fat off the war and the poor war shouldn't ask a thing in return; it can look after itself," an officer reproaches her.

The Chaplain and the Clerk (Michael C. O'Day) have a taste for philosophizing: "In the long run you can't live without peace," the Clerk muses. But the Chaplain explains: "Well, I'd say there's peace even in war — for war satisfies all needs, even those of peace; yes, they're provided for, or the war couldn't keep going — war is like love, it always finds a way. Why should it end?"

Mother Courage, indomitable and incorrigible, bullies, jokes, haggles for lives and money. She combines the comic's wit with the straight man's tunnel vision. Let the Chaplain declare, "We're in God's hands now," and without a blink she responds: "Well, I hope we're not as desperate as that. But it is hard to sleep at night." Let peace be declared (however briefly) and she shouts: "Don't tell me peace has bro-

ken out! When I've just bought all these supplies!"

Ms. Mulamba's Mother Courage has a brisk, occasionally playful competence that works well. Her strong alto voice cuts through scruples with pragmatism: war is a business that should generate business.

Brecht did not want those in the audience to sympathize or identify with what they saw. He wanted them to think and judge. His characters address one other and the audience clinically. The characters feel emotions, but they use them, too.

Before each scene Brecht had placards announce the main events. Here the director, Christopher McElroen, uses five television sets. A newsman reads the announcements in a just-the-facts way, and they remain printed on the screens. Brecht wrote songs that reveal the private life or longings of a character but let us know we shouldn't be taken in. Songs won't change anyone or anything. His lyrics are wonderful and William (Spaceman) Patterson's tunes are serviceable to fine. I couldn't always hear the words, though, and I wanted to.

These European characters are played mostly by African-Americans and Latinos. There are no

name or location changes. There shouldn't be. Mr. McElroen and this fine company add more layers to the alienation effect that Brecht wanted. Nations and names change, but the basics of war don't, especially for what Mother calls "the fellow at the bottom."

This play was first performed in 1941. The war that had begun with Hitler's rise to power had spread through Europe and beyond. In the opening scene an army officer complains, "Peace is one big waste of equipment." These words sound contemporary.