

## THEATER

## Uptown Boys

The Unlikely Story (Let Alone Success) of the Classical Theater of Harlem

By BRUCE WEBER

**A**LFRÉD PREISSER and Christopher McElroen are theater rats, lean and hungry artsy types, the kind of guys who work too hard for too little money, don't shave on a regular schedule and generally look as if they need a few more hours' sleep, especially after the nights they've spent sacking out backstage.

These are the two men responsible for one of New York's more audacious theater enterprises: the Classical Theater of Harlem, a company that they founded in 1999 with about \$9,000 of their own money and that is now in its fifth season in residence at the Harlem School of the Arts, where they are on the faculty. Working on a shoestring budget and mostly with black actors (many of whom live nearby and are relatively inexperienced), the two men — who are, not incidentally, white — have brought a rich diet of shows drawn from the brawniest and most difficult works in the literary canon to a neighborhood where professional theater has had no substantial foothold in decades.

The company's latest production, "Mother Courage and Her Children," Bertolt Brecht's prickly tragicomedy about the de-meaning effects of war on ordinary citizens, opened on Friday at the theater at the Harlem school, on St. Nicholas Avenue, near 141st Street. Written at the start of World War II but set allegorically in the 17th century during the Thirty Years' War, the play tells the story of a shrewd street peddler who is determined to protect and support her family but whose integrity is compromised through petty profiteering and shifting of allegiances.

With a large ensemble cast, an elaborate set (including a floor-to-ceiling bunker made of sandbags) and original music and choreography, it is a physically robust, theatrically adventurous production that, characteristic of both Brecht and the Classical Theater, is also unashamedly confrontational. As directed by Mr. McElroen, it is meant to illustrate just the kind of self-justifying human behavior that will resonate in an era of Enron, Halliburton, terrorism and Iraq.

"It's a fairly aggressive and modern approach," Mr. McElroen said recently in a joint interview with Mr. Preisser at the theater. "Our Mother Courage is selling T-shirts that say 'Got Courage?' and 'I Survived the Bombardment of Riga.' I mean, if she were around today, she'd be down at the World Trade Center site selling trinkets."

The rest of the schedule includes Euripides' "Trojan Women" in the spring, "Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death" by Melvin Van Peebles in the fall and, between them, an undecided-upon Shakespeare.

"We like things that are highly visual and we like an aggressive acting style, an exciting actor-audience relationship," said Mr. McElroen, 31, the company's executive di-



James Rana, left, Devin Emanuel Haqq, Maechi Aharanwa and Gwendolyn Mulamba, who has the title role, in the Classical Theater of Harlem's "Mother Courage."

Richard Perry/The New York Times

rector, about himself and Mr. Preisser. The two met in 1995 when both were working at the Ground Floor Theater Lab on the Lower East Side.

Mr. Preisser, 41, the artistic director, added: "We like big theater, plays with large ideas."

True enough, their ambitions and their limited resources occasionally result in seams showing through onstage. The inexperience of some of the actors can make performances uneven. And the productions can seem a little rickety: opening night of last fall's "Crazy Locomotive," by the Polish playwright Stanislaw Witkiewicz, was interrupted after Mr. Preisser, who was performing in the show, inadvertently started a fire onstage when he tossed his shirt on

a hot light.

But the company's verve and resourcefulness are always in evidence, and its profile was raised considerably last year when its ferocious production of Jean Genet's surreal, defiantly iconoclastic treatise on the subject of race, "The Blacks: A Clown Show," received glowing reviews and moved to an Off Broadway theater downtown.

That show, with its proud indifference to convention and its implicit alignment of a white playwright with the perspective of black artists, also underscored the company's own piquant hierarchy. At a theater that expressly hopes to establish roots and loyalties in a traditionally black neighborhood, the skin color of the leaders is not an inconsequential matter.

"When I got here, one of the first questions I was asked was, 'Why isn't there a local person in there at the theater?'" said Camille Akeju, who became director of the Harlem School of the Arts four years ago. The school, a nonprofit cultural center that offers after-school and Saturday classes in dance, music, theater and visual arts, was the birthplace of Dance Theater of Harlem and the National Black Theater. It has been a fixture in the neighborhood for four decades.

"There's a valid argument," Ms. Akeju said. But Mr. Preisser and Mr. McElroen, she added, bring things to the community "that transcend what ethnicity they are."

She continued: "They're providing wonderful opportunities for both local and

known artists. I won't apologize for having them here."

Little, if any, of the resentment comes from artists. "Yeah, there's some jungle fever going on up there," said André De Shields, the veteran actor who recently starred in the company's production of Derek Walcott's lyrical fantasia "Dream on Monkey Mountain," directed by Mr. Preisser, and who is considering a return to the theater, perhaps in "King Lear" or "Caligula." "But if these are the guys who are up to the task, then the color of their skin doesn't matter."

What particularly impressed him, he said, was Mr. Preisser's attitude toward performance. "We're similar in that we have

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### 'Mother Courage'

HSA Theater, 645 St. Nicholas Avenue. Through Feb. 29.