

# ARTS SECTION

By KEN KEOBKE

A very proper lady told me that the F-word came from the initials of the title carved over one of London's Old Bailey courtrooms: For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge. I heard it a lot last night. I also heard the fashionable word for feces and the Lord's name taken seriously in vain. It was bad. Then I got off the subway and heard it all over again at the Bathurst Street Theatre. It was good.

I went to see *Mother Courage and Her Children*, and somehow I doubt Brecht used the F-word in his play or many of the other things which were said on stage. This was live theatre alive. The Equity Showcase Theatre presented their version and interpretation of the play. I liked it, but a lot of people didn't.

In fact, when the lights came up for the intermission, there was a small stampede for the door when the dust settled, gone were two artistic directors of major Toronto Theatres, a major Canadian playwright, and three members of York's Theatre faculty.

In their rush for the door I caught a few of the phrases of disgust: "They've completely misunderstood Brecht" and "the acting is too large, too stressed." After the intermission, in a slightly less crowded theatre I sat down and enjoyed the rest of the F-words.

The F-words are, of course, just a part of making the play interesting and contemporary. Other ways of making the play about all wars was to include an abstract stage decorated with massive patchwork sails strung up aluminum masts. The flags of opposing countries were plain magenta and plain green. Costumes varied from the bag-lady rags worn by Mother Courage to a tuxedo (minus shirt and tie) worn by Ahmed Hassan, the talented musician/storyteller who played a bowed percussion instrument from Brazil. In between were neo-Nazi and partial policemen's uniforms.

Two Excal reviewers catch their Brecht

## Mother Courage a play with a message

The purpose of the play was to showcase talents in the Toronto theatre community. In some ways this created problems in the production with some actors attempting, during their few minutes on stage, to draw attention to themselves and overact at the expense of being part of the play.

An example of an actor who *didn't* overact was Nadine Rabinovitch, who played Mother Courage's mute daughter Katrin, and turned in one of the best performances of the evening. Acting without the benefit of words, she used her body to express herself and, when upset, a series of urgent guttural cries and moans were used. Particularly delightful was her naive and restrained washboard dance to the Latino song of the whore.

Slightly disappointing was the performance by Michelle George, the former co-chairperson of York's Theatre Department. Although she had strong and believable moments of suffering and grief, the loss of her three children and years struggling across the war torn landscape seemed to leave little impression on her. At the play's end, she seemed no different than at the beginning. Perhaps it is part of a message about our own lack of sensitivity to the atrocities that surround us.

By DAVID BURGESS

Because Bertolt Brecht wrote extensive polemical theory on the theatre, a production of one of his plays can be reviewed in two ways: one can either write of how "Brechtian" the play is, or one can examine its success without regard to Brecht's theories and models. Happily, Equity Showcase's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (at the Bathurst St. Theatre until October 25) fares well, if not perfectly, using either criteria.

Though former York Professor Michelle George as Anna Fierling, the title's ironic Mother Courage sped through the first scenes, she gives an unapologetic performance, especially during the songs. She admirably refuses to charm the audience, a deadly temptation to



MICHAEL MCENMOTT

PUTTING THE PROLETARIAN BEFORE THE WAGON: Michelle George as Mother Courage in yet another production of the Brecht classic.

any actress in the role.

Director Steven Kent shows a good feel for Brecht, skillfully avoiding pathos at every turn. The scene where Courage's son Swiss Cheese (Robert Bellefeuille) dies off-stage explains Brecht's notion of the theatrical alienation effect better than any amount of theory could possibly do. In a traditional *dramatic* play this would have been a "moving" moment; here we are untouched emotionally, but are instead forced to conclude on an emotional level, that Courage's capitalism robs her of humanity.

Astrid Janson's design is in keeping with the Brecht/Caspar Neher (!) style and freshly communicative at the same time. The stage's upward rake from downstage left to up right acts as a vivid visual metaphor for the play's theme of a structurally-based struggle.

On the other hand, with John Lang's new

musical compositions, an attempt to follow Brecht's own impulse to always contemporize, the production has a good idea poorly executed. The music is a dainty kind of electro-pop in a play which has nothing to do with prettiness and the contradiction between the music and the action hinders rather than helps.

The one "musician" who was a success was the rapping Ahmed Hassan. As the story-teller, Hassan sets up the appropriate dialogue with the audience, continuing the rap into the post-show request for donations.

This epic play about the Thirty Years War is well worth seeing, not just because the admission is free (although that certainly helps), but because it is Brecht's most eloquent work, speaking not just about war, but about the war-like conditions imposed by capitalism even in peacetime.

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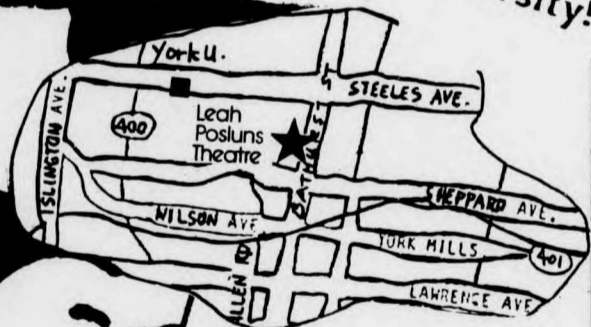


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