

OPENING THIS WEEK  
**Mother Courage**

# Oh, What a Crazy War!

**B**ertolt Brecht's indomitable *Mother Courage*, one of the most colorful characters in 20th century drama, pushes her wagon of food and other goods behind the battle lines during a cataclysmic war, determined to ply her trade amid the death and destruction all around her. This eventually takes its toll on her own children. She's a symbol not only of misplaced priorities during wartime but also of the disdain held by the German-born, Communist-registered Brecht for capitalism and materialism. *Mother Courage and Her Children* (as it was titled in its original translation), is set during Europe's 17th century Thirty Years War, but when it premiered in 1941, it evoked strong resonance for the then-raging World War II.

Accordingly the S.O.B. Theatre Company is offering a revival of the Brecht classic, setting it in the ravaged hellhole of contemporary Iraq.

Jeffrey Wienckowski, artistic director of the 2-year-old S.O.B., feels the play has much to say about the endless cycle of international wars, and that in some ways is timelier than ever. He explains, "I, like most people in my

group, am not thrilled with what is going on with our current government administration. There is so much in the play that exactly parallels what is happening now in terms of our political scene: a war of profit dressed up as a moral crusade. We aren't changing the text much at all, aside from a few cuts. The well-known Brechtian device of slide presentation allows us, at certain moments, to project images of things that are going on right now. In our costuming, we're going toward a Middle Eastern feeling for the Catholics in the play, and the Protestant Army will be dressed in GI outfits—but kind of exaggerated. The set will suggest the interior of a bombed building."

Certain plays in the Brecht canon, including *Mother Courage*, paved the way for what came to be known as the Epic Theatre movement. These works used what Brecht called *verfremdungseffekt* (the alienation effect). Brecht strove to evoke intellectual rather than emotional responses to the political themes in these works by using placards and headlines to divide the play into sections, incorporating songs, and emphasizing presentational techniques in all aspects of design and staging. According to Wienckowski, he is honoring Brecht's original aims, though he adds, "It's difficult to get a room full of talented contemporary actors together and tell them, 'Don't give me any emotion.' To me the main thing is to not play up the sympathy or emotion, and let it come out naturally. One thing that helps with the distancing effect is the humor. There's a lot of it in the text, and we are doing our best to emphasize it. The distancing effect will also be enhanced by the use of mask work, which I think is very interesting. The military characters wear the masks, and as *Mother Courage* and her chil-

dren get drawn into the war, pieces of the masks are placed on them. This shows the dehumanizing effect of war. After a while, you lose sight of the fact that the people on the war front are living, breathing humans."

Wienckowski believes that the biggest challenge of the Brechtian style is the episodic structure. "It's hard for everybody to get their mind around the whole thing. We've been rehearsing a scene here and a scene there. With the actor's varying schedules, it's been tough to do things in order. Not until you start piecing things together do you begin to feel the arc of the play." S.O.B. holds open auditions, but it admittedly gives priority to company members—currently there are about 10—or to people



Lee Anne Moore, Pete Pano, and Eric Carter in *Mother Courage*.

whose work is familiar to the directors. It was a challenge to properly cast the larger-than-life role of *Mother Courage*, and Wienckowski feels he is fortunate to have found Lee Anne Moore, with whom he has never worked before. "We put out a call to other theatre groups, and she came to us from the Zoo District," he says. "She's amazing. The great thing is that she really understands the humanity of the character, while, at the same time, the absurd sense of it. Some moments of the play almost have a Marx Brothers feel, and Lee Anne captures that beautifully."

S.O.B., launched by a group of Cal State Northridge graduates and now a resident tenant at Hollywood's Theatre/Theater, tends toward iconoclastic work. The company started with Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in 2002 and has done six other shows, including a music-hall vaudevillian take on *Oedipus the King*. Next up after *Mother Courage* is a grunge-rock adaptation of *Antigone*. "Our main focus is to take the type of production that would intimidate both producers and audiences and make it really accessible," Wienckowski says. "Usually we try to find something that is intelligent and says something about the day and age that we live in." It's not surprising that the company would be attracted to the challenging, heady work of Brecht in general and *Mother Courage* in particular, with its elements of absurdist theatre. Says Wienckowski, "War is absurd in many ways, which makes *Mother Courage* absurd and hauntingly real at the same time."

—Les Spindle

*"Mother Courage,"* presented by S.O.B. Theatre Company at Theatre/Theater, 6425 Hollywood Blvd., 4th FL, Hollywood. Fri-Sat. 8 p.m., 2 p.m. Jan. 7-Feb. 5. \$10-15. (323) 465-3136.