

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## Mother Courage and Her Children

Bertolt Brecht  
Eclipse Theatre  
Bristol Old Vic  
(2004)

I have only a passing acquaintance with the works of Brecht, who like Shaw, that other village explainer of yesteryear, is an increasingly diminishing object in the theatrical rear view mirror.

So if I say, as I do, that this touring Nottingham Playhouse production is dreadful and you are moved to damn me roundly for an ignoramus and a buffoon more suited to reviewing the works of the Reduced Shakespeare Company, or *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, ignominy be on my head.

For me, though, this is Brecht wrecked, serious political drama reduced to cheap laughs and acted in a manner more suited to pantomime. Oh no it isn't? Well, let me say first off that Tynan, a dilettante's dilettante, viewed the works of Berthold as deeply serious and, according to my copy of *Changing Stages*, by Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright, *Mother Courage* is a tragedy.

You'd never know it though from this production. I don't mean to damn the actors, who, I'm sure, are deeply committed. The set too, by Rosa Maggiora, is terrific; a curved wall of blue on to which a red sun is projected. As the lights go up and a lone figure clings to a bare tree, the scene recalls that other exploration of the vicissitudes of human existence, *Waiting for Godot*.

Here, the setting is updated from sixteenth century to twentieth century Africa and a country riven by civil war. A neat and fair conceit. And translator/adaptor Oldaipo Agboluaje, has some smart one-liners. He also has some awful ones the most unforgivable of which is: "How longer can she depend on aid from the colonel after she has given him her own AIDS." Now I am aware of the Black Death-like swathe that AIDS is carving through Africa, but this surely is a serious matter trivially referred to and as such is, as I say, unforgivable. It is made the worse by the fact that other topical references are spewed out – David Beckham and Manchester United - the less topical - Monica Lewinski – in the same way with only one view; to get easy laughs.

I think this play underestimates its audience and, while I can't say how it will play elsewhere, didn't go down well here on at least one night. Carmen Munroe, as Mother Courage, (a theatre veteran best-known for her role in the Channel 4 sitcom *Desmond's*) lent a dignity to this production it did not merit. I would also note Kobna Holdbrook-Smith as 'the young ensemble.'

This production has garnered, as they say, plaudits, which is the thing to do with plaudits, but I have to say I found it wrongheaded and dull. I recognise the energy that goes into the performances but energy is not always, as Blake observed, eternal delight, not anyway when it is misdirected. Brecht wrote: "The finest plans have always been spoiled by the littleness of those that should carry them out. The emperors cannot do it all by themselves." Quite.

*This production has also been [reviewed](#) by Steve Orme at Nottingham and [David Chadderton](#) in Manchester.*

Reviewer: [Pete Wood](#)