



Mother Courage and Her Children

By **Bertolt Brecht** Translation **Michael Gow**
Music Composition **Stefan Gregory**
Director **Eamon Flack**

Notes for teachers

These notes are designed as a reference for students and teachers who have viewed Belvoir's 2015 production of *Mother Courage and Her Children*. They intend to support discussion of this particular production in the classroom.

Contents

- i. Production credits
- ii. Key biographies
- iii. Promotional image and marketing copy for the production
- iv. Character list
- v. Scene-by-scene synopsis of Michael Gow's translation of *Mother Courage and Her Children* (2015)
- vi. A note on the translation and Eamon's motivation to work on the play
- vii. A note on the time, place and production design
- viii. Set and costume design images
- ix. A note on Brecht, Belvoir and this production
- x. A note on the music and songs
- xi. The character of Mother Courage
- xii. *Plucking up her courage*: Robyn Nevin in conversation with Clive Paget (Limelight, June 2015)
- xiii. *Mother Courage: A triumph for Robyn Nevin* John McCallum (The Australian, June 2015)
- xiv. *Will's Final Speech*: An extract from Michael Gow's play *Once in Royal David's City*, which premiered at Belvoir in February 2014 (*Mother Courage and Her Children* show program, 2015)
- xv. Brecht on the web: Online resources suggested by Belvoir *Brecht & Political Theatre* tutor Shannon Murphy
- xvi. Interview with Shannon Murphy (Radio National, March 2015)
- xvii. Acknowledgements

Belvoir presents

MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN

By **BERTOLT BRECHT**

Translation **MICHAEL GOW**

Music Composition **STEFAN GREGORY**

Director **EAMON FLACK**

Set Designer **ROBERT COUSINS**

Costume Designer **ALICE BABIDGE**

Lighting Designer **BENJAMIN CISTERNE**

Fight Choreographer **SCOTT WITT**

Production Manager **MARK HASLAM**

Stage Manager **ISABELLA KERDIJK**

Assistant Stage Manager **KEIREN SMITH**

Rehearsals Observer **ALISTAIR CLARK**

With

Yvette / others **PAULA ARUNDELL**

Swiss Cheese / others **TOM CONROY**

Sergeant / others **LENA CRUZ**

Young Soldier / others **MICHAEL McSTAY**

General / others **ALEX MENGLET**

Cook / others **ARKY MICHAEL**

Mother Courage **ROBYN NEVIN**

Chaplain / others **ANTHONY PHELAN**

Eilif / others **RICHARD PYROS**

Clerk / others **HAZEM SHAMMAS**

Katrin **EMELE UGAVULE**

Belvoir's production of *Mother Courage and Her Children* opened at Belvoir St Theatre on Wednesday 10 June 2015

Key Biographies



BERTOLT BRECHT Writer

Poet, playwright and theatre theoretician, **Brecht** was born in 1898 in the medieval city of Augsburg, Germany. He is generally considered one of the great playwrights and directors of the 20th century. Even now, almost 60 years after his death, his plays – along with those of Chekhov – are the most frequently performed works in the modern repertoire. His early plays such as *Baal* and *Drums in the Night* are examples of nihilistic expressionism and caused riots at their openings, bringing Brecht instant notoriety. In *Man Equals Man* he began to develop his theory of 'epic theatre', promoting a style of acting and staging that created estrangement or *verfremdung*. Songs played an important part: for these Brecht wrote the lyrics for music by Paul Hindemith, Kurt Weill, Hanns Eisler and others. Under national socialism, Brecht went into exile in 1933, settling in Denmark and later in the US. Works written in his most mature phase include *Mother Courage and Her Children* and *The Good Woman of Szechwan*. An outstanding example of epic theatre is *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. From 1948 Brecht lived in East Berlin. In 1949 he formed the state-supported Berliner Ensemble, with his wife, actor Helene Weigel. Brecht died of a heart attack on 14 August 1956 while working on a response to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.



MICHAEL GOW Translator

Michael's plays include the Australian classic *Away, Once in Royal David's City*, *Toy Symphony*, *The Kid*, *On Top of the World*, *Europe*, *Sweet Phoebe* and *Live Acts on Stage*, 17 (for the Royal National Theatre of Great Britain). His plays have been performed in Poland, the Czech Republic, Vietnam, Japan and all over the USA. Michael has been Associate Director of Sydney Theatre Company and Artistic Director of the Queensland Theatre Company. He has directed for all the major Australian theatre companies as well as Opera Australia, Australian Theatre for Young People and the Lincoln Centre's New Visions New Voices program. Michael's awards include two NSW Premier's Literary Awards, two Sydney Theatre Critics' Circle Awards and an AFI Award for writing the ABC miniseries *Edens Lost*.



EAMON FLACK Director

Eamon is Associate Director – New Projects at Belvoir. He graduated from the acting course at WAAPA in 2003 and has since worked as a director, actor, writer and dramaturg for Belvoir, Melbourne Theatre Company, Malthouse Theatre, Bell Shakespeare's Mind's Eye, Perth International Arts Festival, Darwin Festival, Playwriting Australia and various other companies. For Belvoir, Eamon has directed *Once in Royal David's City*, *Angels in America Parts One and Two*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *Babyteeth*, *As You Like It* and *The End* (which toured to Malthouse Theatre), co-adapted Ruby Langford Ginibi's memoir *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, with Leah Purcell, and co-devised *Beautiful One Day* (a co-production with ILBIJERRI Theatre company and version 1.0, which has toured to Melbourne, regional Victoria and London). His dramaturgy credits for Belvoir include *Brothers Wreck*, *Neighbourhood Watch*, *The Wild Duck* and *The Book of Everything*. Eamon's productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (B Sharp/Bob Presents/Arts Radar) and *Wulamanayui and the Seven Pamanui* (Darwin Festival) have both toured nationally. He has adapted and directed Gorky's *Summerfolk* (Bob Presents) and his adaptation of *Antigone* was produced at the Perth International Arts Festival and published by Currency Press. *Angels in America* was awarded Best Play at the 2014 Helpmann Awards. Eamon will direct *Ivanov* later this year at Belvoir. He will be Belvoir's Artistic Director from 2016.

Promotional image and marketing copy for the production



Robyn Nevin
Illustration: Julian Meagher (2015)

The great Robyn Nevin plays the great Mother Courage. At last.

Mother Courage and Her Children is a magnificent pageant of humanity in extremis, full of celebration and bastardry in equal parts, and burning with love and disgust for the human species. Its author is the great smartarse of the dramatic canon – an entertainer, a liar, a communist and a libertine whose appetite for the exuberant variety of life is only surpassed by Shakespeare. Mother Courage is Brecht's masterpiece.

Anna Fierling is a refugee. She has three children, a shop in a cart, and buckets of chutzpah. She buys and sells her way through a massive and pointless religious war – gulling, lying, charming, inveigling. Will those great capitalist qualities save her from the common fate?

Directed by Eamon Flack, who proved with his masterful production of *Angels in America* that the epic can be moving, this 20th century colossus about a 17th century war is a vision of the 21st century – of globalisation, religion, violence, capitalism, love and pity.

Character List *Mother Courage and Her Children*

Anna Fierling An entrepreneurial businesswoman, known as 'Mother Courage'

Katrin Her gentle daughter, also a mute

Eilif Her elder son, joins the Protestant army

Swiss Cheese Her younger son, becomes the Protestant army's regimental paymaster

Recruiting Officer and **Sergeant** Responsible for recruiting Eilif

General The General of the Protestant regiment, for whom Eilif is fighting

Cook The General's cook

Chaplain The religious leader of the Protestant army

Yvette A prostitute who follows the army

The man with the Eye Patch, a **Captain** and a **Sergeant** A spy and two members of the Catholic army who arrest Swiss Cheese and later execute him

Clerk In charge of recording complaints made to the Catholic Army Captain

Young Soldier Complains to the clerk about the injustice of a Catholic officer

Other characters Soldiers and peasants encountered on Mother Courage's travels

Scene-by-scene synopsis of Michael Gow's translation of *Mother Courage and Her Children* (2015)

Scene 1

It's New Year (1624) somewhere in Poland and a Protestant Sergeant and a Recruiting Officer converse on a country road. The Thirty Years' War between European Protestant and Catholic armies has been going for six years and the Recruiting Officer, who needs four men to fulfil his General's request for more soldiers, complains that no-one will sign up. The Sergeant suggests that with so long between wars, people have forgotten their morals. Faint carnival music can be heard off stage before a brightly coloured canteen cart is pulled on by two young men, Eilif and Swiss Cheese. Inside the cart rides their mother, known as Mother Courage, and their mute half-sister Katrin. During the introductions Eilif and Swiss Cheese explain that Mother Courage got her name because she drove through the bombardment of Riga with a load of bread that wouldn't last another day. Courage adds that she is only called Mother Courage because she was terrified of 'going broke'. The Sergeant demands to see the paperwork that gives them license to trade and Courage, whilst managing to talk her way out of presenting any formal documentation, loses her son Eilif to the Recruiting Officer who has manipulated him into joining the war.

Scene 2

Two years have passed since Eilif disappeared to fight in the war and Courage, along with Katrin and Swiss Cheese, has been following the Swedish Army through Poland with her cart. In a General's tent at military camp, Cook and Courage haggle over the price of a fat chicken. Courage won't budge on her price, arguing that the whole army is so hungry they are boiling up pieces of leather for dinner. As they continue to argue, the hungry General enters into an adjacent room with two guests, one who happens to be Eilif and the other the Chaplain. Cook begrudgingly agrees to Courage's price and the two eavesdrop on Eilif as he recounts a recent massacre on some peasants, whose cows he stole to feed the army. The General, impressed, calls Eilif his 'own son' and pronounces him 'a true Christian hero'. **Song.** Courage appears and embraces Eilif before clipping him across the ear for risking his life.

Scene 3 Another three years of war have passed and Courage's cart is parked in another military camp. Courage is turning a good profit on the buying and selling of useful objects such as shoes and bullets. Meanwhile, Swiss Cheese has joined the Protestant army as regimental paymaster, a position that does not require him to fight at the front line. Courage declares Swiss Cheese to be her 'honest' son, in comparison to Eilif who is her 'brave and clever' one. The character of Yvette is introduced. Courage suggests that Yvette has slept with multiple men and although the two appear to be friends, Courage dryly insults Yvette by suggesting that she might have a sexually transmitted disease. Yvette is upset and departs, leaving Katrin to play shyly with the extravagant hat and red boots she leaves behind.

Yvette returns to tell Courage the story of how she fell in love once, to a man nicknamed 'Puffing Pete'.

Song.

More time has passed. Courage, Chaplain and Cook all share a drink. They discuss religious war and Courage explains that war is 'always fought for profit' and that 'if it wasn't, little people like me wouldn't get involved'. Suddenly the roar of explosives and shooting can be heard and a soldier runs on warning that the Catholics have launched a surprise attack. Courage tries to rescue her washing as the others jump to the defence, drinks still in hand. Courage, disappointed that this is happening just as she was 'starting to make a bit of money,' hurriedly packs down the cart. Cook runs off and chaos ensues at the camp; Swiss Cheese runs on with the military cash box he has been charged to protect; Yvette searches for her red hat so she can greet the Catholics in style and Kattrin is forced to change out of the red boots. Courage reluctantly lends the Chaplain a cloak to cover his Protestant robes and, concerned for her daughter's safety, rubs clay on Kattrin's face so she might go unnoticed.

It's three days later and, along with part of the regiment, Courage and her group – Kattrin, Swiss Cheese, and now the Chaplain - have been taken prisoner by the Catholic army. Chaplain complains that he cannot hold a church service or he will be shot and Swiss Cheese, chiefly concerned with protecting the military cash box, wonders if he should risk returning it to his General. When Courage leaves for supplies, Swiss Cheese decides to take the cash box and bury it by the river for safekeeping. As Kattrin retrieves drinks from the cart, a sinister man appears wearing an eye patch. Kattrin tries desperately to warn Swiss Cheese but, not picking up on her warnings, he pushes past her and leaves with the box.

Courage returns to find Swiss Cheese gone and Kattrin mimes that a man with an eye patch has been spying on him. Courage hangs a brand new Catholic flag on her cart as three Catholic soldiers bring Swiss Cheese on, explaining that they have been searching for the man with the enemy's cash box. Courage pretends that she does not know her son, but suggests that Swiss Cheese looks like an honest person, hinting to him that he would hand it over if his 'life depended on it'. However, Swiss Cheese continues to deny knowing anything about the cash box and he is dragged off stage.

Courage learns that Swiss Cheese's situation is a case of life and death and is concerned that Kattrin and herself will be implicated in the crime. Courage decides to 'hock' her canteen cart (the Catholic Colonel has agreed to purchase it for his new mistress Yvette) so she can pay off the one-eyed man to release Swiss Cheese, explaining that 'people acting corrupt is like god being merciful'. She plans to reimburse herself with money from the hidden cash box. Courage has one hour before Swiss Cheese is due to present in Military Court and Yvette, who has agreed to help Courage with the bribe, goes to meet the one-eyed man in the forest and offer money for Swiss Cheese's release. Yvette returns and reports that the one-eyed man has agreed to take 200 guilders and that Swiss Cheese, under pressure, threw the cash box into the river. Courage is alarmed. With the cash box gone she can no longer afford the 200 guilders, so she tells Yvette to return and offer 120 guilders else she will lose her business and her livelihood. Courage then has Yvette haggle on her behalf, running back and forth to negotiate with the one-eyed man who refuses to reduce the amount.

Courage finally relents and tells Yvette to run back and offer the full amount, but as she does the sound of military drumbeats can be heard. Yvette returns pale and reports that Swiss Cheese has been executed. With all the wheeling and dealing, Courage has lost her son. Yvette reports that the Catholic army don't think the cash box is in the river, but rather that it is in Courage's cart. Soldiers bring Swiss Cheese's body to the cart to see if they can illicit a response from her but as they reveal his body she shows no emotion. Only when the soldiers leave does Courage reveal a grief-stricken face.

Scene 4 Courage is waiting outside the Catholic Captain's tent wanting to make a complaint against the officers who slashed her cart. The Captain's Clerk advises her against this; everyone knows there was an enemy paymaster at her cart and it doesn't look good, but she insists. Suddenly the Young Soldier runs on, furious with an officer for stealing a reward he earned capturing a horse. He is warned by an older soldier not to make a complaint because he'll be thrown in gaol. Courage and the Young Soldier both wait for the Captain. **Song.** Courage, suggesting that the Young Soldier doesn't understand the corrupt ways of the war, changes her own mind and withdraws her complaint.

Scene 5 Two more years have passed and Courage's cart has travelled through Poland, Maehren, Bavaria and Italy and is now back in Bavaria. It's 1631 and the cart is parked in a village that has been

destroyed by artillery. Two soldiers are looking for a drink but they can't pay their way so Courage refuses to serve them. A local farmer and his wife, badly wounded by fighting, are in desperate need of bandages but Courage won't give any away. The woman's baby can be heard from inside their ruined farmhouse and, against Courage's advice, Katrin goes inside to rescue it. Katrin coos to the baby as chaos surrounds the cart once again.

Scene 6 Courage has parked her cart in the city of Ingolstadt in Bavaria, for the funeral of the Catholic General who got lost in the fog and ended up at the front line. It is raining and in the distance we hear drums and a funeral march. Courage remarks to the Clerk that they wanted to ring bells for the General but the army blew up all the churches on the General's order. Courage wants to know if the war will end now that the General is dead because she is interested in whether she should stock up her cart. The Clerk remarks that there will 'always be another hero to fill his place' and the Chaplain adds that there will always be someone in power to 'help the war along its way'. They all discuss how long the war will last and the Chaplain bemoans his wasted talents as a Chaplain. A soldier enters and buys a drink; he is depressed because tomorrow he will be fighting at the front line. **Song.** Courage decides to take the Chaplain's advice; since the war will go on forever she will stock up on supplies. Courage sends Katrin into town to pick up supplies and while she is gone the Chaplain proposes to Courage that perhaps they could start a romantic relationship. Courage shrugs him off as Katrin returns terrified, for she has been attacked and sustained a large, bloody wound to her head. Courage fails to placate Katrin, who crawls into the cart and slams down the shutters. Katrin's excruciating wails can be heard as Courage curses the war 'to hell'.

Interval

Scene 7 More time has passed and Courage celebrates being at the peak of her business career. **Song.**

Scene 8 In the same year the Swedish King falls and rumours of peace threaten Courage's thriving business. After several years' absence, Cook enters and Courage enthusiastically throws her arms and legs around him. Cook advises Courage to try and flog all of her wares for cheap before everyone realises that the war is over. Courage respects his advice and is beginning to make plans when Yvette, now the wealthy widow of the Colonel's brother, enters. Courage and Yvette embrace before Yvette recognises Cook as 'Puffing Pete' the only man she ever loved. Yvette berates Cook and Courage leaves with Yvette. In her absence, soldiers drag on Eilif whose hands are bound behind his back. Eilif has been charged with breaking into a farmer's place whose wife now lies dead. Eilif has come to see his mother but is dragged away before she returns. The Chaplain tells Cook not to tell Courage. The roar of gunfire can be heard as Courage runs on shouting that peace is off and the war is back on. **Song.**

Scene 9 It's 1634 and the war has already lasted sixteen years. Courage and Cook are talking in the early hours of the morning. Cook suggests that Courage leave Katrin to run the cart and the two of them take over his inheritance; an inn in Utrecht. Although Courage is tempted by the idea, she refuses to leave her daughter alone. **Song.**

Scene 10 Throughout 1635 Courage and Katrin continue to drag the cart through Central Germany, following the ever-more bedraggled armies. They trail along a country road. **Song.**

Scene 11 It is a bitter cold dawn in January 1636 and the canteen cart stands in front of an old farmhouse. Three soldiers creep in from the woods and drag out the farmer, his wife and their son. Courage is in town buying items on the cheap so Katrin is dragged out of the cart alone. The soldiers violently demand directions to the sleeping town and reluctantly the farmer's family point out the path. Since the hillside is crawling with soldiers they cannot alert the townsfolk of the imminent attack, so they simply begin to pray. Katrin however, creeps back to the cart and climbs onto its roof with a drum. She begins to beat the drum as the family implore her to come down and the soldiers threaten her with death. Katrin, terrified but determined, continues to beat her drum until she is eventually shot dead, collapsing and falling to the ground. As Katrin dies, the sound of an alarm is raised.

Scene 12 Courage returns from town to find Katrin's body. Pained, she crouches over the body, singing her a gentle lullaby. **Song.** Courage then pays the farmer a small fee to see that Katrin's body is

properly buried for she means to find Eilif quickly, unaware that he is likely dead as well. As the lights fade, Courage struggles to pull the heavy cart alone, following another regiment. **Song.**



Mother Courage and her Children cast in rehearsals for the production. The cast rehearsed full time for 5 weeks in the Belvoir Rehearsal Room.
Photograph: Lisa Tomasetti (2015)

A note on the translation and Eamon's motivation to work on the play

Mother Courage and Her Children was written by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht in 1939 and first published in 1941. The Australian playwright Michael Gow has newly translated this version of the play from the Brecht estate's official German edition, for Belvoir.

The idea to do this production came when director Eamon Flack worked with Michael Gow on Michael's play *Once in Royal David's City* (2014), which extensively references Brecht's work. Eamon was interested in working on a play that could facilitate an examination of 21st century globalisation. He felt that *Mother Courage and Her Children*, a play about profiteering from chaos and conflict, was a good fable to explore the present relationship between globalisation, war and capitalism.

A note on the time, place and production design

Although Brecht wrote this play in 1939, and as Germany prepared to enter the Second World War, he chose to set *Mother Courage and Her Children* in Europe during the Thirty Years' War (1618 – 1648). Fundamentally a religious war fought between European Protestant and Catholic states, the Thirty Years War was one of the longest and most destructive conflicts in human history. Setting his play in the 17th century allowed Brecht to offer his 20th century audiences a portrait of war as a dirty, nasty and corrupt 'way of life'.

Belvoir's production of *Mother Courage and Her Children* is made for Australian audiences in 2015. Australians are beginning to have an experience of what global chaos looks like in the 21st century and how it could directly affect our country; we are also a capitalist society operating in a truly global economy. For this reason the production is intended to feel like it could be taking place **anywhere in the world at this moment**.

'All along the violent frontiers of globalization the situation is as Brecht describes it in his play. This is true of war zones – Syria, the Ukraine, Iraq – but it is similarly true of other places too, not technically at war but beset by the barbarism that comes when old ways of life clash with the new demands of modernity and capital; such as they have in parts of China and South America, Pakistan, Gaza, Lebanon and the Philippines.'

Eamon Flack, Directors Note *Mother Courage and Her Children* show program (2105)

Thus, the production design for the Belvoir production of *Mother Courage and Her Children* features contemporary elements that are not place or time specific. The set, stage props and costume design deliberately give the feel that **we could be anywhere in the post-modern world**. Simultaneously, the actors speak in their own natural accents. The character of the General (played by Alex Menglet) has a Russian accent as Menglet was raised in Russia but the other actors all possess Australian accents, which give the production a feeling that **we could also be somewhere very local**. These are deliberate directorial choices.

'This show is the about the ongoing 17th Century out there on the frontiers of globalisation. But it also about us, the West, dragging our goddamn cart into the 21st century as through we have no alternative...'

Eamon Flack, Directors Note *Mother Courage and Her Children* show program (2015)

Set and costume design images

Director Eamon Flack worked closely with the Australian designers Robert Cousins (set designer) and Alice Babidge (costume designer) to create the world of the play.

Robert Cousin's set features white painted floor and walls with a painted black corner where props, costumes and musical instruments are stored. Besides several plastic chairs, Mother Courage's brightly painted cart is the only set piece. Simultaneously, Alice Babidge's costumes reference clothing that we associate with the last few decades.



Set model box by Robert Cousins
Photo: Simone Evans (2015)



Robyn Nevin, Richard Pyros and Tom Conroy in the Rehearsal Room
Photo: Lisa Tomasetti (2015)



Robert Cousins's set design for *Mother Courage and Her Children*
Photo: Heidrun Löhr (2015)



Robyn Nevin, Hazem Shammass, Emele Ugavule & Anthony Phelan
Photos: Heidrun Löhr (2015)



Arky Michael Robyn Nevin, Lena Cruz, Alex Menglet & Richard Pyros



Design references cover the Belvoir Rehearsal Room walls.
Photo: Simone Evans (2015)

A note on Brecht, Belvoir and this production



Belvoir's 2011 Season Launch Campaign

Belvoir, along with other theatre companies in Australia and abroad, are making theatre in a post-Brecht era where Brecht's theatrical techniques are accepted as modern practice.

Belvoir is very much a Brechtian theatre because the mechanics of the theatre are on display to the audience. The building at 25 Belvoir Street was (famously) never built to house a theatre company (rather a tomato sauce factory) and this makes the Belvoir corner stage unique. The stage is not symmetrical but best described as an irregular pentagon; the building's brick work is exposed; the lighting grid contains no fly-bars and the roof is relatively low lying for a theatre. Brecht offered audiences an empty stage and Belvoir offers its audiences a season of plays that focus on great storytelling and creativity, rather than extravagant technical production.

At Belvoir, you've never had the capacity for illusion or transformation.
Eamon Flack

Students may like to consider Belvoir's logo (affectionately known as 'Troy') in a discussion of Belvoir as a Brechtian Theatre.

Students who have studied Brecht will also recognise Brechtian techniques specific to the style of Epic theatre in this production. Some things students may like to look out for include:

- As per Brecht's original script, the structure of the play is episodic and significant time lapses occur between scenes. Sharp, bright lighting changes (like flash bulbs) are often used to signify a change in time or place.
- The characters sing songs, which occur as 'musical interruptions' within scenes. These songs are sung directly to the audience.
- Most of the cast performs multiple roles in the play. Only Robyn Nevin (Mother Courage) and Emele Ugavule (Katrin) do not double as other characters.
- The set is very open and encompasses a number of different settings. The white painted walls and floor works with Benjamin Cisterne's bright, clear lighting design to create a stark backdrop to the events of the play.
- The painted black corner of the stage is a space where props, costumes and musical instruments are stored throughout the show. Actors often wait in this space between their scenes, which gives the sense that this could be a backstage area, on stage.
- Costumes used in the play are hung on exposed hooks in this black corner of the stage and actors often change their costumes in front of the audience.
- The actors' performances are not naturalistic, but bold and slightly stylised.
- Although Eamon has chosen not to include *gestus* in this production, students may like to consider the intense, still focus given to Courage at the end of Scene 3. Here, Courage looks up to the sky as a blindingly bright light closes in on her near-frozen face, highlighting her grief.
- The staging at the climax of Scene 12 is also highly stylised. Here, Katrin simply stands on a plastic chair to suggest that she has climbed the cart, and faces the audience drumming. The characters that surround her also face the audience but it is suggested that they are staring up at her, and although the soldier eventually shoots straight into the audience, Katrin (who is physically beside her) is shot dead.

Please note that Eamon has chosen *not* use the surtitles suggested in Brecht's original script.



Robyn Nevin
Photo: Heidrun Löhr (2015)

Scene 3. Mother Courage is left alone in private agony after she has viewed Swiss Cheese's body.



Robyn Nevin and the cast of *Mother Courage and Her Children*
Photo: Heidrun Löhr (2015)

Scene 4. Mother Courage sings 'The Big Surrender' accompanied by the cast.



Arky Michael, Emele Ugavule and Paula Arundell
Photo: Heidrun Löhr (2015)

Scene 12. Kattrin bangs her drum as the farmer and his wife try to talk her down before the soldiers arrive.

A note on the music and songs

Music composition for this production of *Mother Courage and Her Children* is by Stefan Gregory. Stefan wrote the music especially for this production, and specifically for the group of musicians and actors working on the show. Eamon and Stefan explored the idea of making the music feel like it had come from many different parts of the world. They wanted the music to feel a bit Broadway, whilst at other times feeling as though it could have come from somewhere in Eastern Europe. Many of the songs, notably 'The Big Surrender', have a modern-pop flavour to them and are accompanied by warm coloured lights.

The musical songs within the play perform two functions: the music lets the audience in and allows the audience to understand more about the characters' emotions and beliefs, as well as interrupting scenes and forcing the audience to separate from emotional points in the play.

Songs are performed by actors directly facing the audience, often in a tableau-like formation, with limited choreography so as not to distract from the lyrics.



Tom Conroy, Anthony Phelan and Lena Cruz in rehearsals
Photos: Lisa Tomasetti (2015)



Arky Michael in rehearsals

The character of Mother Courage

Director Eamon Flack admires Brecht's 'remarkable capacity not to judge the people on stage' and thinks it was revolutionary how the play was written 'completely from the view of the little people'.



Robyn Nevin in rehearsals for *Mother Courage and her Children*
Photo: Lisa Tomasetti (2015)

She's rat cunning. And determined. She survives on her wit and her will power and her ability to negotiate. She makes terrible mistakes along the way but then don't we all? I love (her) resilience and resourcefulness and... courage.

Robyn Nevin for Belvoir TV

Watch the full clip here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3dGtpLnbZH4>

press clip



Limelight
June, 2015

Page: 48
Section: General News
Region: National, AU
Circulation: 8535
Type: Magazines Lifestyle
Size: 3,295.00 sq.cms.



slice
CUT STRAIGHT TO YOUR NEWS

ROBYN NEVIN

interview

PLUCKING UP HER **COURAGE**

Robyn Nevin is about to star in *Mother Courage and Her Children*, a play she directed back in in 2006. **Clive Paget** talks to her about the ideas and work of Bertolt Brecht, and his lasting impact on Australian theatre today

Bertolt Brecht was undoubtedly one of the 20th century's most influential theatrical voices. Has he been important for you as an actor and director?

I wasn't exposed to Brecht at all at drama school, but in the 1970s I was in a quite significant and very enjoyable production of *The Good Woman of Szechuan*. It was The Old Tote Theatre Company which preceded the Sydney Theatre Company and was in effect the State Theatre Company of NSW. I worked there in a loosely formed ensemble for a while. It was just after John Bell had returned to Sydney from his time in London and before he started the Belvoir St Theatre. He did this production of *The Good Woman of Szechuan* at the old Parade Theatre – I think that was my introduction to Brecht.

It was interesting because at the time we all felt that the play had a kind of preachy quality to it. I was quite uncomfortable about that. The audience went to Brecht because they appreciated and understood him. They 'got it', but there was some sort of discomfort, some sort of tension, and a feeling that there was this preaching coming from the stage. So that was an interesting first. I played Mrs Shin in that production – a creature who's lived within me ever since and made a number of appearances over time [laughs]. I'd been working with John Bell on another production that was distinctively vaudevillian in form, and I think it influenced the way in which we approached the Brecht. I think I learnt a lot from that. I

absorbed a profound understanding of acting from that production and that has been hugely influential actually.

When you first came across his work, what was Brecht's standing as a writer and theatre maker in Australia?

I think he was unfamiliar to most of us, except in an academic way. John Bell was forging a new way of directing Australian plays. He did a lot of Shakespeare and imposed on the great Shakespearean plays a kind of Australian voice, which was probably as a result of the greater education he had received from working internationally. Australia was a very small, closed theatrical community at that time. It was just emerging in the 1970s and presenting theatre with a distinctive Australian sensibility.

Before that, I have to say, we revered the English way of doing things. When I was very young, actors and readers on the ABC used these kind of RP voices. An Australian accent was never heard, really, on an Australian stage. That was the beginning of modern Australian theatre, I think, and Brecht and his ideas must have played a role in that.

Both Richard Wherrett and John Bell had recently come back to Sydney from international experiences and they brought a new vigour and way of looking at things – a sort of 'anti-theatre' approach as it were. Richard had worked at Joan Littlewood's theatre in England and returned with a very bold, vigorous, almost unconventional approach. New form – it was a very exciting time to be around.

Photograph © Brett Boardman

press clip



**Limelight
June, 2015**

Page: 48
Section: General News
Region: National, AU
Circulation: 8535
Type: Magazines Lifestyle
Size: 3,295.00 sq.cms.



slice
CUT STRAIGHT TO YOUR NEWS



“AN AUDIENCE WATCHING
AN ANTI-WAR PLAY TODAY
WILL BE THINKING ABOUT
WAR ZONES... AND THERE
WILL BE MOTHER COURAGES
LOCKED UP IN DETENTION
CENTRES SOMEWHERE,
NO DOUBT!”

press clip



Limelight June, 2015

Page: 48
Section: General News
Region: National, AU
Circulation: 8535
Type: Magazines Lifestyle
Size: 3,295.00 sq.cms.



slice
CUT STRAIGHT TO YOUR NEWS

I guess now we see a fair amount of Brecht in Australia. Do you think our sense of his greatness as a playwright has changed in the last 50 years?

Well yes, because I think people now are much more aware of his legacy. The ways in which theatre is made today reflect absolutely his fundamental principles. And although he was a Marxist, I think he was a pragmatist too. I think he was hedging his bets. He was such a theatrical animal. He knew what worked on the stage and he was bold and radical. The reason that dramatists and productions have taken so much from his ideas is because they work. Audiences love them; audiences love somebody coming up and standing outside the action of the scene and singing at them. It's revue, and we all love revue!

So will you be revisiting Brecht's writings before you play *Mother Courage* for Belvoir?

No, I don't feel the need to read the theory. The director [Eamon Flack] will have his approach and will talk about the ways in which we will regard Brecht and Brechtian principles, I suppose. But because we're all now accustomed to theatre of a Brechtian kind, we don't really need to delve deeply into his great works of theory to understand how to put on one of his plays. If you look at the Belvoir stage, the mechanics of theatre are on display all the time – and that's Brecht.

Simple open staging, acting with large gestures, and plays with lots of music. It all comes from him. I find it particularly interesting now to embark on a play that was a reaction against a kind of acting that I absolutely love to do. I love Chekhov, I love Ibsen, I love Stanislavsky! On the other hand I love vaudeville, I love cabaret, I love political revue. So it's really interesting to switch from one to the other, and I think we do that instinctively nowadays when we approach a Brecht play.

As an actor, do you ever consciously think "this is Brecht and therefore I have to somehow engage with a particular style of acting"?

No, I don't think you do. I think because I've worked in so many different kinds of productions, I've absorbed all these different ways of doing it. I'm influenced by the text, number one – that's what you're fundamentally working with. The text and your own body, they're your two resources. And then you have your colleagues. Not just the actors, not just the director, but also the composer, the designer, everybody in the room. Especially in an Eamon Flack production, I have to say.

Eamon is intensely collaborative – that's just his way of being in the world. Eamon works brilliantly with ensemble pieces. He knows how to create a community



"I was smitten with Robyn on *Angels in America* and wanted to work with her on something she could run wild on. *Mother Courage* is the great role she's never played – a continuation of her hallmark performances in *A Cheery Soul* and *Neighbourhood Watch* – these embattled, unput-downable women"

Eamon Flack
(Director,
Mother Courage)

on stage and a communal feeling in the room, and all of that contributes to the end result. I've only worked with Eamon once – on *Angels in America* – but that was extraordinary. It was a calm, thoughtful room, slow, considered, fun, very focused and hard working. So slow sometimes that I would get worried because I've got quite a fast-moving energy, but of course the slowness is so significant and important. I've been through an enormous variety of theatrical processes and based on more than 50 years of doing it in a room, I kind of know what to do, I think. Of course, I could be completely wrong and Eamon may surprise me [laughs].

You directed *Mother Courage* in 2006 for Sydney Theatre Company. As you prepare to play the central character, would you say that your view of what the play is about has changed as a result of that previous experience?

No, it's such a different experience. It's really like starting again. Reading the new Michael Gow translation, it's quite different from the David Hare version, which I directed. There were moments of familiarity when I read Michael's version, and I got flashes of the staging of our production – but only flashes. I can't really understand that, and I don't need to understand it, but I'm very glad that's the way it is.

Is that more because the translation makes it feel different, or is that the difference between being a director and being an actor?

I think it's a bit of both – but I think it's more the latter. As the director you're reading the whole. You need an overview at the same time as absorbing every moment of the action. As the director you're also thinking objectively about it, because you're thinking about staging and the design. It isn't until you actually get in the room with the actors that you focus on that moment-to-moment aspect of realising a text – and that's just the experience of being with other people. Reading it as the actor, I'm experiencing it from the character's point of view, from her position within the scene. God forbid that Brecht should ever hear me say the words, but I am to an extent *identifying* with her [laughs].

All Brecht tends to be done in translation in English speaking countries. How important is the particular translation for the success of the play, do you think?

I think it's absolutely crucial. David Hare's translation is very good, of course, but it's got an Englishness to it. I love Michael Gow's rhythm. It's brusque, and yet it's very energetic and it's got a great deal of forward movement. There are long sentences, which I love, yet it's also very sharp and short.

press clip



Limelight June, 2015

Page: 48
Section: General News
Region: National, AU
Circulation: 8535
Type: Magazines Lifestyle
Size: 3,295.00 sq.cms.



slice
CUT STRAIGHT TO YOUR NEWS

With translations, the context matters so much. I mean, we are doing this play *now* in the context of all of the violence and ugly and tragic chaos that we see represented on our televisions in daily news broadcasts from so many parts of the world. You can't help but be aware of the horrors in Syria, Iraq and Ukraine. That context is absolutely real and it's very, very vividly portrayed and very distressing.

It feels like the world is very precarious right now. It's not difficult for us to imagine the world tipping over into some more widespread war front when we are being confronted with stories of atrocities on our screens every day and every night. So that's our context right now. The context of the Thirty Year War was shocking. I don't know precisely the numbers, compared with what Brecht was seeing advancing daily with the Second World War, but the casualties were among the largest in history. Each time we revive *Mother Courage*, the participants in the play and the audiences watching it inevitably will read from our own context and be saddened. Mind you, Brecht wouldn't want that, would he? [laughs]

But I think that's inevitable. I think that an audience watching any kind of anti-war play today will be thinking about the war zones we know about, will be thinking about our Gallipoli experience, will be thinking about the detainees up in Nauru and so on. Our own involvement, our own participation, our own responsibility for those people fleeing from war. And there will be some *Mother Courages* locked up in detention centres somewhere, no doubt!

So with all that contextual background, what do you think the message of the play is for us today?

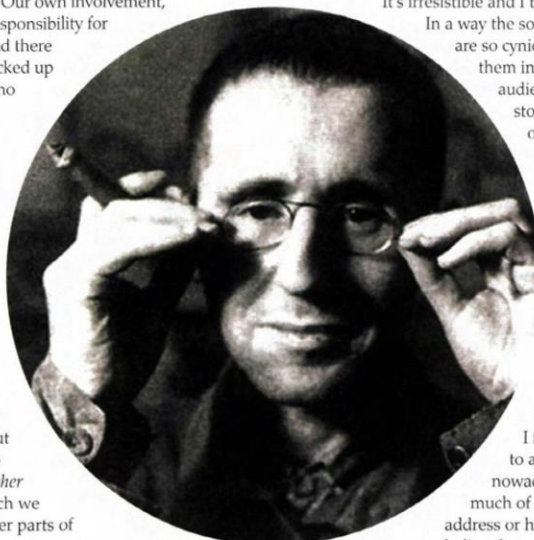
I think it's about suffering and survival. The characters we meet in *Mother Courage* are at the front line. They're there on the battlefield, and they are the people that suffer – the casualties of war. Way above them is a stratum of people who profit from war – whether it's governments or big business – but this play is about the people who fight and lose. It may be that *Mother Courage* is about the ways in which we compromise or abandon the better parts of ourselves in order to survive, or benefit from, war.

But isn't *Mother Courage* herself someone who is attempting to profit from war?

Of course she is. But on the way she loses three children because she is so busy negotiating a transaction of some kind in order to make a profit. Each time she does that one of her three children dies. She loses everything, but in the end she picks up the

"Robyn has the physical and vocal technique to say and sing it all; she has the instincts and skills of a tragedienne and a clown; she hates sentimentality; Robyn's *Mother Courage* contains all the great women betrayed by the world she's already played: Hecuba, Blanche and so many others"

Michael Gow
(Translator,
Mother Courage)



cart and continues on her way. What more can she do? She has to survive. She's the ultimate pragmatist and I think Brecht himself is a bit of a pragmatist.

She's an unsympathetic character and that's exactly what he meant to write, but nevertheless I have to confess that when I read the new Michael Gow version, I wept like a fool. Of course, when I'm reading it I'm identifying with the woman, because inevitably you do when you're playing a character – that's just your job. I read it fast and straight through and it was kind of unbearable – but then I'm very, very susceptible to public pain. I feel the weight and the burden of public suffering. I'm a bit of a sucker – probably not a good audience in Brecht's mind.

I'm not a sentimental actor. I never have been a sentimental actor and I think that has perhaps been somewhat to my detriment as a performer. Audiences don't fall in love with me in the same way that they do with actors who are more open emotionally. But I wept when I read it, so I think I'm going to be OK!

Music was always an important element for Brecht. Why do you think he so often puts songs in his plays? What is it that he hopes to achieve?

The songs are intensely theatrical. I mean, we all love music! Everybody responds to it at a very profound level. It's irresistible and I think he recognised that power.

In a way the songs are all very 'instructional'. They are so cynical, but also there's the idea of them interrupting the narrative so the audience doesn't get too involved in the storytelling. Their attention is taken over and they become absorbed by a song which comments on the characters, or the action, or life in general. Being distracted makes them think in a different way. It's fantastic entertainment, of course, and people just love songs! And they love music.

Given his enormous influence, do you think that Brecht has 'literary heirs' among playwrights who are writing for the stage in Australia today?

I find that question so difficult to answer because I think that nowadays everybody has absorbed so much of Brecht. Many writers use direct address or have characters that come out and speak directly to the audience. David Williamson does that, and Michael Gow might perhaps owe some allegiance to Brecht. But I don't know. I think we have all absorbed so many of his so-called techniques and his philosophy and his ways of making theatre that his impact now is very widespread. I think it's a massive influence, and thank God for it! Thank God for him!

***Mother Courage and her Children* is at Sydney's Belvoir St Theatre from June 6-July 26**

Will's Final Speech

Michael Gow

The following is an extract of Will's final speech from Michael Gow's play *Once in Royal David's City*, which premiered at Belvoir in February 2014.

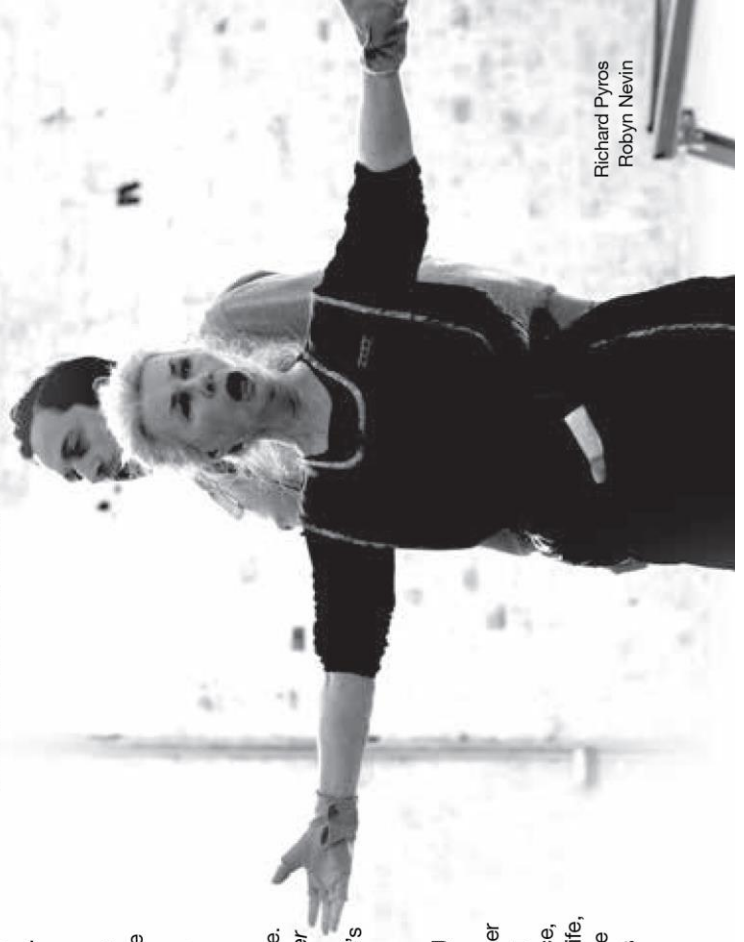
WILL: Good morning. My name is Will Drummond. I'm here to talk to you about political theatre.

Pause.

In particular, Bertolt Brecht and his theories. Bertolt Brecht was born in a town in Bavaria in 1898 and died in Berlin in 1956. But you can look that up, anywhere, that's not... So. Right. During the First World War Brecht saw the suffering caused by the war, the men broken by the machines, the bombs, the gas. He saw the suffering caused by the collapse in world markets. He looked for reasons for all this misery. He studied Marxism and found answers. What is Marxism? It's a theory of history that says this: the group of people, the social class, that owns the means of production, which provides all the things... I don't need to tell you this, you can look that up too. Go and read about the Ruling Class and the Working Class and the bourgeoisie. But. This is what I want to tell you. Capitalism is very smart, a very creative system. Capitalism is always at war, creating new markets. It will destroy whatever it needs to in this war: countries, so it can move its money around to make more money; it destroys people's will, by giving them lifestyle, consumer goods

that is the unending war capitalism wages against the world to stay in power and keep making a profit. It will smash everything, not just countries but families, communities, even the natural world. It will invade your minds and colonise your imaginations if it thinks there'll be more things to sell and markets to buy. Brecht says we must resist this, with our sorrow and our rage. Sorrow is a feeling. Righteous anger is a feeling. Even thinking can be a feeling. And he wants us to feel. Feel a lot. Huge feelings, great feelings. Optimism. Faith in men and women. A better life for those who come after because we

can at least try to change things. If we're worthwhile human beings we pity the people onstage, feel for them, feel along with these people, like this old woman who's had everything taken from her, dragging her cart along an endless road. Feel along with everyone on the losing side in the endless war. Because we could all end up on the losing side. Even if you have the material comforts the system bribes you with, if the system demands it, if it means bigger profits can be made, everything you have will be taken off you. It's war. Don't give up, don't stop struggling to end it.



Richard Pyros
Robyn Nevin

THE AUSTRALIAN

Mother Courage: A triumph for Robyn Nevin

JOHN MCCALLUM THE AUSTRALIAN JUNE 12, 2015 12:00AM



Robyn Nevin's vivacious Mother Courage shows that Brecht can still be provocative and fun. Source: Supplied

Robyn Nevin's brittle and brilliant Mother Courage is lively and often very funny, but underneath there is the world-weariness of a woman who has been following armies in a long war, making a parasitic living off them and in the process losing all her children. Nevin's performance is magnificent.

This Mother Courage might have been warm, and she clearly loves her children, but she has a bitter job to do. She has to survive and in the political and economic world of Brecht's play, this requires a cool toughness. Each moment of sudden grief is briefly and movingly reflected in Nevin's lined face, and each ensuing moment of resilience is tragic.

Every decision she makes is a business one: haggling over a trade too long to save her first son, over a bribe too long to save her younger son, and then going off to do another deal leaving her emotional daughter Kattrin to her fate. ("She's cursed with compassion, poor thing.")

In this tightly urgent translation by Michael Gow, superbly directed by Eamon Flack, not a moment of this great play is neglected. The design by Robert Cousins sets it on a bare stage, but the cart is a colourfully lit-up red stall full of fast-food snacks and beach thongs for sale. And, because this is a war, ammunition and booze for the men.

In Alice Babidge's costume design Mother keeps appearing in an array of pastel clothes that she has clearly had for sale and then, when winter comes and the war gets bad, puts on for warmth.

The songs have been rescored by Stefan Gregory. There is so much pleasure and irony in his new compositions, including versions of the Fraternisation and Capitulation songs. The actors are also

the musicians or singers, and they are terrific.

Anthony Phelan as an ageing philosophical Chaplain and Arky Michael as a younger version of the Cook compete for Mother Courage's attention. Tom Conroy and Richard Pyros are very good as her doomed young sons. Paula Arundell's Yvette is full of the bright shallow triumph of predatory capitalism.

But, as it should be in this play, long wars finally overwhelm us, here with evocations of Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Emele Ugavule plays the mute suffering Kattrin with a wonderful sternness of purpose.

This is a very fine production, which ought to do a lot to correct the mistaken impression, which some people still seem to have, that Brecht for all his seriousness is not also provocative and fun.

Mother Courage and Her Children. By Brecht. Translated by Michael Gow. Belvoir St Theatre, Sydney, June 10. Tickets: \$39-\$72. Bookings: (02) 9699 3444 or online. Duration: 2hr 20min including interval. Until July 26.

Studying Bertolt Brecht on the Web

Online resources recommended by theatre/film director and Belvoir Brecht & Political Theatre tutor, Shannon Murphy.

A study guide intended for students in the UK taking examinations in English literature, drama or theatre arts at GCE Advanced (A2) and Advanced Supplementary (AS) level.

<http://www.universalteacher.org.uk/drama/brecht.htm>

The International Brecht Society

A huge site with thousands of links and mounds of info. Should be very useful if used selectively.

<http://www.brecht society.org/>

The Berliner Ensemble

The website of Brecht's theatre company which is still operating today in Berlin and puts on one of his plays a year.

<http://www.berliner-ensemble.de/>

Brecht and Marxism

A very useful sight that deals almost solely with Brecht and the effect of Marxism upon his work.

<http://www.dogma.lu/txt/Kellner-Brecht.htm>

Shannon Murphy was recently interviewed about her love of political theatre and why she teaches for Belvoir on *Books and Arts*, ABC Radio National. You can listen to her interview here:
http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/rn/podcast/2015/03/bay_20150328.mp3 (44 – 53 minutes)

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Eamon Flack and the cast of Belvoir's *Mother Courage and Her Children* and to Shannon Murphy who has taught her Brecht and Political Theatre workshop for Belvoir to thousands of high school students across Sydney and Regional NSW.