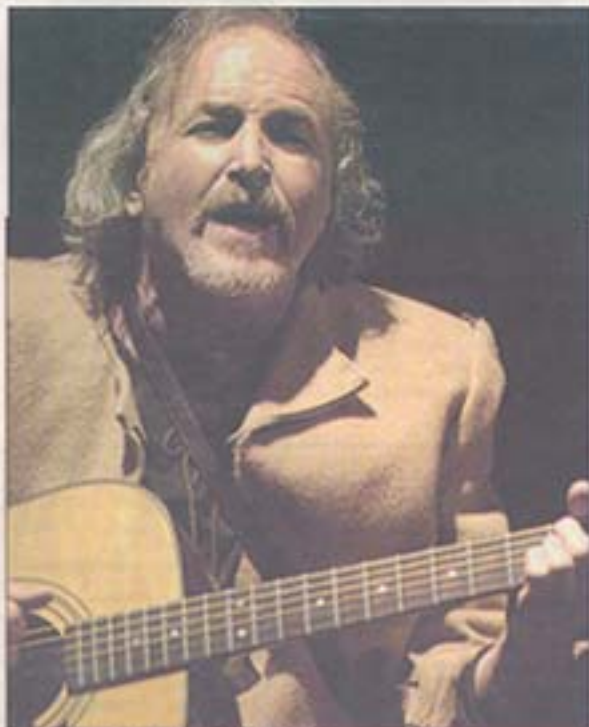




Mother Courage (Wendy Ishii) protects her daughter (Brenna Freestone) in Bas Bleu Theatre Company's "Mother Courage and Her Children."

# 'Mother Courage' must-see theater



Bradley Handley performs as the Chaplain.

By PHYLLIS WALBYE  
104 ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

At the Academy Awards presentation this week, when Paul Haggis accepted his co-screen-writing Oscar for "Crash," he quoted Bertolt Brecht.

Brecht said that it wasn't enough to use art as a mirror to hold up to society, but to use the arts as "a hammer with which to shape it." Haggis related to that.

Needless to say, the Bas Bleu Theatre Company's production of Brecht's "Mother Courage and Her Children" is hard-hitting.

Brecht devised what he called Epic Theater so his plays could hit with a political power punch that was beyond realism, eluding emotions for provocative ideas.

Bertolt Brecht wrote "Mother Courage and Her Children," considered by many to be his masterpiece, when he was in exile from Germany in 1939.

He called it a warning to people, including entire neutral countries, who thought they

could either stay out, or maybe benefit financially, from the impending World War II.

He set his anti-war play in the 17th century during the Thirty Years War involving Poland (Catholic) and Sweden (Lutheran). Brecht takes swipes at plenty of big targets.

The translation of "Mother Courage" directed impressively for Bas Bleu Theatre by Eric Prince is by Britain's David Hare, a very outspoken opponent of the war in Iraq.

In fact, Hare's recent play featuring conversations of George W. Bush, Tony Blair and other usual suspects is titled "Stuff Happens."

Remember that incredibly insensitive "stuff happens" quip about the disastrous aftermath of our invasion of Iraq made in a press conference by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld?

OK, the lines are drawn. Obviously "Mother Courage" will be appreciated by those who oppose the war in Iraq.

But there is another group who should see it — people who are enthusiastic theatergoers but have not seen a Brecht play.

Because they are so challenging to produce, they are seldom presented regionally. Crmon, you've GOT to see a Brecht play at least once.

Don't stay away because you think it will be too high-flown. It's hearty and earthy (and admittedly quite long at nearly three hours).

Don't think Brecht is a total unknown to you. Recall Bobby Darin's hit "Mack the Knife" — "Oh, the shark has pretty teeth, dear, and he shows them pearly white, just a jackknife has Macbeath, dear. And he keeps it out of sight."

Those lyrics are by Bertolt Brecht for the song by his friend Kurt Weill for their classic musical "The Threepenny Opera" (a revival starring Alan Cumming is about to open on Broadway).

Music was important to Brecht and he used it in plays to bring them closer to a sense of staged illusion and the distancing he sought for an audience.

Determined to put its own stamp on a production of "Mother Courage," Bas Bleu Theatre Company commissioned Fort Collins singer-songwriter Barbara Clark to create a suite of songs that are performed throughout the production by cast members and Clark.

Some of them provide memorable moments and add notes of surprise. A few reflect a raw,



Katrin (Brenna Freestone) finds real courage of thought and action.

tough Brecht-Weill sensibility. But more reflect cabaret songs by Jacques Brel that were evocative during the Vietnam War.

The indomitable Wendy Ishii, artistic director and leading actress for Bas Bleu Theatre Company, adds to her array of extraordinary performances as Anna Fierling, called Mother Courage.

As a traveling merchant of "war commodities," she tries to keep her children alive and away from the military while she profiteers from the war.

The vision of Mother Courage pulling her heavy cart across war-torn Europe is one of the quintessential images in the history of international theater.

Ishii embodies all the muscular cynicism and raw-wound determination of Brecht's Mother Courage.

There are fine performances by members of the large Bas Bleu cast, Bradley W. Handley's hapless Chaplain among them. And he has a solo that is one of the best musical numbers in the show.

Brenna A. Freestone is mesmerizing as Katrin, the most daughter of Mother Courage, who tries to protect Katrin while railing about her shortcomings.

Freestone gives the play its transcendent moments at the end of the play as Katrin finds a spirit of independence that demands courage and idealism that she did not learn at her mother's knee.

## If You Go

"Mother Courage and Her Children" will be presented by the Bas Bleu Theatre Company through April 1. Performances are at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday and 2:30 p.m. Sunday.

The Bas Bleu Theatre is at 401 Pine St. in Fort Collins. Tickets are \$10-\$19. For more information and reservations, call 498-8949 or visit [www.basbleu.org](http://www.basbleu.org) on the Internet.