

Theater review: Recession in Yahoo



A prescient 1936 Brecht allegory is set in earnest, musical motion by David Gordon and company.

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David Gordon's new adaptation of Bertolt Brecht (with music by Hanns Eisler), like its source, doesn't particularly emphasize its audience's comfort. It's a mistake, though, to assume that this work strives to create distance from its audience; instead, its chilly, sometimes jaunty austerity amounts to an earnest attempt at communication (even if the message is disconcerting).

The action, based on Brecht's "Roundheads and Pointed Heads," happens in a land called Yahoo. The economy is a shambles, and the viceroy (Louis Vuolo) charges his vice viceroy (Davis Duffield) with formulating a plan. The subsequent solution: Foment ethnic strife in the land, encourage violence and internal dissension, and keep the eyes of the rabble from landing upon the actual cause of their troubles (the ruling class, this being Brecht).

Along the way there are any number of digressions, musical and otherwise. Brecht himself (Valda Setterfield) appears, along with Eisler (Gina Leishman, who ably handles the stripped-down musical accompaniment). The cast delivers the songs, full of cynicism and caustic irony, with appropriately jaundiced enthusiasm.

Billed as a movement piece, "Uncivil Wars" uses wheeled ladders and platforms to sway the action to and fro. There's no set, and with the players dressed in uniform black boiler suits, the eye is free to track the energetic, if understated, action. Gordon's choreography serves here to reflect a subtle but strong interpretation of Brecht's restless sophistication. Every inch of the stage is utilized at one time or another, and the actors are in near-constant motion.

The subsequent story plays out in a manner that allows nearly everyone in Yahoo to behave with swinish self-interest, from the farmer (David Skeist) who uses his landlord's imprisonment as an excuse to steal his horse, to the cool Mother Superior (John Kelly) who ruthlessly negotiates her price for sheltering a young woman at her convent (nearly all the actors here play multiple roles; Kelly also plays a madam).

This chillingly smart piece of theater is clearly trying to connect with the present, and it is discomfiting to make these parallels and recall that Brecht wrote his prescient play in 1936. In difficult times, icy clarity and a blithe denunciation of the order of things are among the more satisfying responses available, perhaps as much now as then.

Quinton Skinner writes regularly about theater.