



SEATTLE  
SHAKESPEARE

# MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN

By Bertolt Brecht  
Translated by David Hare  
Directed by Jeff Steitzer



## EDUCATOR RESOURCE GUIDE

# WELCOME

Dear Educators,

War still racks our world in 2015. There are armed conflicts and humanitarian crises all across Syria, Iran, Yemen, Ukraine, Nigeria, Sudan, and more. However, it is the powerful who generally drive these wars, and the ordinary people who suffer and are displaced. We in the U.S. are aware of these wars, but since our military has been deployed for so long, we are also numb to the direct effects of war happening a half a world away.

This is the perfect time to present *Mother Courage and Her Children*. It's a story about war, but it's a story that actively resists pulling your heart strings the way that many stories on the subject do. In a time when we've seen so many heartbreaking images and heard so many personal stories of refugees and casualties, *Mother Courage and Her Children* does not so much try to tap into your feelings as attempt to tap into your thoughts. Our main protagonist is not innocent or particularly sympathetic, but a war profiteer who leads us through her story and its grim consequences. Brecht's style of alienation asks the audience to think critically about the war, including who profits and who is harmed by it, and in that way to engage with the idea of war in a different way.

As you watch this production and discuss it with your students, think about the different ways we engage with war. The challenge we are facing in our time is how to deal with wars that seem not to have an end, and certainly do not have a victorious or glorified end in sight. When our feelings have been numbed by the sadness we've been shown for many years, maybe it is helpful to also view art that does not ask us to sympathize, but asks us to consider and to question what our relationship is to war in the twenty-first century.

Best,  
Michelle Burce  
*Education Director*

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# SYNOPSIS

During the Thirty Years' War, Canteen Anne Fierling, who is known as Mother Courage, is selling food and liquor to soldiers from her cart. She is accompanied by her family, which includes her sons, Eilif and Swiss Cheese, and her mute daughter, Kattrin. The family encounters two soldiers, one who makes a deal with Mother Courage for supplies, while the other enlists Eilif into the army.

Two years pass. Mother Courage and a Cook who works for a Protestant General argue over a chicken. The General himself congratulates Eilif for killing peasants and their cattle. However, Eilif is scolded by Mother Courage for putting himself in harm's way.



Jennifer Lewis as Yvette and Meryl Streep as Mother Courage at the Public Theater.

Three more years pass and Swiss Cheese now works as an army paymaster. After watching the camp prostitute, Yvette, sing about the first enemy soldier she fraternised with, Mother Courage warns Kattrin against involving herself with soldiers. The Cook and the Chaplain bring news of the Catholic troops arrival. Swiss Cheese hides the regiment paybox while Mother Courage changes her insignia from Protestant to Catholic. Later, Swiss Cheese is captured trying to return to the paybox to his general. Mother Courage tries to barter with the soldiers for his life, but has to walk the tightrope of hiding her true identity and saving her son. She takes too long negotiating the deal and Swiss Cheese is executed. To save herself, Mother Courage pretends not to recognize the body.

Later, Mother Courage and a soldier wait outside the General's tent to register complaints, she for the loss of her cart and he for unequal pay. They sing a song called "The Great Capitulation" and come to the conclusion it's best to leave things be.

Catholic General Tilly has died and as the funeral is being prepared, Mother Courage and the Chaplain talk about how much longer the war will last, as her supplies are running low.

The Chaplain responds that war always finds a way and then offers to marry Mother Courage, but she rejects him. She sends Kattrin to town, who returns having been raped and disfigured and the cart's supplies scattered. Courage curses the war and thereafter returns to following the Protestant army with her cart and daughter in tow.

A year later, peace has been declared. Mother Courage and the Cook flirt and try to outdo each other as to who has had it tougher during the war. The Chaplain appears and argues with the Cook. Yvette enters and recognizes the Cook as the man who left her. Courage takes Yvette to town. Eilif enters in chains and is executed for murdering peasants. Mother Courage never finds out and starts a business with the Cook.

The war enters its seventeenth year and there is no food. Mother Courage learns from the Cook that he has inherited an inn and he offers that she run it with him. He says that Kattrin cannot come with them, so Mother Courage and her daughter pull the wagon on their own.

They reach the Protestant town of Halle. While Mother Courage is away, the Catholic army attacks. Kattrin, awakened by a search party, warns the town by beating a drum. She is shot and killed saving the town. Mother Courage sings to her daughter's body and then has the villagers bury it. She then hitches herself to her cart to continue to follow the soldiers.



Ursula Yovich as Mother Courage at Queensland Theatre Company.

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

**ANNA FIERLING**, Mother Courage

**KATTRIN**, her daughter

**EILIF**, her eldest son

**SWISS CHEESE**, her younger son

**THE COOK**

**THE CHAPLAIN**

**YVETTE POTTIER**, a prostitute

**THE RECRUITING OFFICER**

**THE SERGEANT**

**THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF**

**THE AMOURER**

**A SOLIDER**

**THE SECOND SERGEANT**

**THE MAN WITH A PATCH**

**A VERY OLD COLONEL**

**MERCANERIES**

**THE REGIMENTAL CLERK**

**YOUNG SOLDIER**

**OLD SOLDIER**

**SOLDIER IN FUR COAT**

**SECOND SOLDIER**

**FARMER'S WIFE**

**PEASANT**

**SOLIDER IN THE BAR**

**YOUNG MAN**

**OLD WOMAN**

**GUARDS**

## SOURCES AND SETTING

*Mother Courage and Her Children* is one of many plays Brecht wrote as a response to the rise of fascism and the Nazi Party. When Adolf Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, Brecht and collaborator, Margarete Steffin, wrote the play in little over a month, in what some critics referred to as a white heat.

Brecht chose to set the play during the Thirty Years' War, which happened between 1618 and 1648. Originally based in a conflict between Catholics and Protestants in the divided Holy Roman Empire, the war expanded as political motives brought new nations into the war until it consumed most of Europe (as World War II would soon after *Mother Courage and Her Children* was written).

The disruption of industry and ongoing costs of war gutted government funds. Soldiers (like Mother Courage's son, Eilif) were expected to fund themselves through plunder, bringing devastation to entire populations as armies moved across the continent. It was one of the longest, most damaging conflicts in European History.

Spanning 1624–1636, the play is made up of twelve scenes, each separated by a year or two. The play portrays the horrors of war and the idea that being a good person is not rewarded in corrupt times.

Brecht took the name "Mother Courage" from the picaresque writings of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century German writer Grimmelshausen, whose book *The Runagate Courage*, contained a character who struggles to survive during the war. The prototype for the character herself appears in two of Brecht and Elisabeth Hauptmann's earlier collaborations. In *Man Equals Man* or *A Man's a Man* (1926), the shrewd and resourceful widow Leocadia Begbick owns a canteen wagon and follows the British army through India. In *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930), Leocadia Begbick is a resourceful fugitive who establishes a brothel to serve Alaskan gold miners and lumberjacks.

# BERTOLT BRECHT BIOGRAPHY

Eugen Berthold Brecht was born in 1898 in Bavaria, Germany. He began writing poetry, journalism, and theatre as early as his teens. Brecht developed anti-war beliefs while studying theatre in college during World War I. After the war ended, Brecht's generation developed a strong disappointment in a society which was reeling from the cost of the war. How to tackle issues of class, economics, and war through theatre would drive most of Brecht's career.

Brecht moved to Berlin, where he began to work with many influential cultural figures in the city. Brecht also became influenced by the works of Karl Marx. His work became known for his sharp critique of current German society and began to draw the ire of the Nazi party; supporters of the party even threw stink bombs onstage during productions of his plays.

In the mid-1920s, Brecht began working collectively on plays with a fluctuating group of collaborators. Two prominent contributors to plays from this period were Elisabeth Hauptmann and Kurt Weill. Their most notable achievement is *The Threepenny Opera*. In this and subsequent works, Brecht developed what is known now as Epic Theater. Brecht sought to create theatre which engaged its audience rather than consume it, that provoked thought rather than be purely entertainment. *The Threepenny Opera* was a huge success in Germany and abroad.



Bertolt Brecht and Elisabeth Hauptmann working on *The Threepenny Opera*.

In 1933, fearing intensified persecution by the Nazi party, Brecht went into exile and moved to France, then Denmark, then Sweden. He soon had to flee to the United States as Hitler's forces invaded Norway and Denmark. In Germany, his citizenship was revoked and his works were burned. Brecht was totally cut off from German Theatre, yet this period was very prolific for him as a playwright. *Mother Courage and Her Children*, written during exile in Sweden, was Brecht and collaborator Margarete Steffin's response to Hitler's invasion of Poland. Subsequent

plays such as *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* continued Brecht's fame as a playwright.



Brecht appearing before the House of Un-American Activities Committee.

In 1947, Brecht left the United States, after being brought before the House Un-American Activities Committee for his communist beliefs. After the end of World War II, Brecht was able to return to Berlin where he formed his own company, the Berliner Ensemble. Often viewed with suspicion by East Germany and flat out boycotted in West Germany, Brecht nevertheless enjoyed great success in his homeland and abroad. He continued to clarify his vision of theatre, urging audiences to remind themselves that they are seeing a presentation of events of human behavior with a scientific spirit rather than be caught up in an illusion. Brecht died of a heart attack in 1956.

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# EPIC THEATER

*Mother Courage and Her Children* is an example of what was called Brecht's "epic theater." Brecht had a strong reaction against what had been called "the well-made play." He argued that by concentrating on the illusion and emotion that theatre could provoke, audiences would focus more on the action onstage rather than their own lives. Brecht wanted his plays to provoke critical thinking rather than emotion. In order to achieve this, he developed his "Verfremdungs-effekt" or an "alienation effect." This was to use anti-illusory techniques to remind the audience that they were in a theatre, watching an enactment of reality rather than reality itself. This was achieved by flooding the stage with white light, regardless of what was happening on stage. There would also be very few props or scenery, interrupting the main action of the play with songs to drive home a specific message, and the use of place cards to indicate a scene's location. Brecht would also demand a similar style from his actors. Rather than

realism and identifying with the role, the actor was asked to be more objective and detached, almost an commentator to the action of the play.

Brecht's attack on what was typically thought of as theatre certainly influenced and continues to influence Western Theatre today. The idea of breaking down what people thought of theatre can be seen in the plays of writers like Samuel Beckett. Also, the idea of making theatre political is one which continues today in both regular and musical theatre; theatre now is seen as a medium where one can provoke thought as well as emotion. In addition, many directors took Brecht's principles and applied them to other plays. For example, a Brechtian bare-stage has been utilized in many different productions by the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Here are some examples of ways that Epic Theater differs from Realistic Theatre.

EPIC THEATER	REALISTIC THEATRE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theater is a place for instruction</li> <li>• Appeals to intellect and reason</li> <li>• Deals with social and political issues</li> <li>• Inspires audience to change society</li> <li>• Shocks and inspires thought</li> <li>• Focuses on society in general</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tells a story about real life</li> <li>• Draws the audience in to identify with characters in the story</li> <li>• Deals with everyday problems</li> <li>• Based around emotion and life</li> <li>• Focuses on specific characters</li> </ul>
<p><b>Narration</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Narration interrupts dialogue</li> <li>• Narrator observes and talks to audience</li> </ul>	<p><b>Narration</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Usually no narration</li> <li>• Scenes are acted out realistically</li> </ul>
<p><b>Costumes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Used general costumes, to indicate "any farmer" instead of a specific character</li> <li>• Minimal and symbolic</li> </ul>	<p><b>Costumes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• True to the time and place of the story</li> <li>• Reflect specific character choices</li> </ul>
<p><b>Sets</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blank simple sets with symbolic items</li> <li>• Projections used</li> <li>• Production elements visible</li> <li>• Episodic scenes</li> </ul>	<p><b>Sets</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete detailed sets</li> <li>• Reflect time and place of the story</li> <li>• Production elements masked or hidden</li> <li>• Scenes are chronological</li> </ul>
<p><b>Lighting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• House lights kept on</li> <li>• Flat white lights</li> </ul>	<p><b>Lighting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stage brighter than house</li> <li>• Use color and lighting to indicate time, place, and mood</li> </ul>
<p><b>Movement and Voice</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mixed realistic and expressionistic styles of moving</li> <li>• Used circus, mime, and acrobatics</li> <li>• Included singing and chanting to comment on the action</li> </ul>	<p><b>Movement and Voice</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Movement is realistic, uses the whole body and whole stage</li> <li>• Lifelike speech patterns</li> <li>• Songs can be used by actors onstage to express emotions or continue story</li> </ul>

# PLACING THE PRODUCTION

Brecht set *Mother Courage and Her Children* during the Thirty Years' War, even though the play was actually commentary on World War II. Brecht created the character of Mother Courage, who profits off of the war, but does not end up any better off for it, as a cautionary tale.

The design team for *Mother Courage and Her Children* wanted to achieve a similar effect for this fall's production as Brecht did in his time; they wanted to comment on the wars happening now, but set the play during a past war to give the audience some distance and perspective on the subject. The set is very simple, anchored by Mother Courage's famous wagon that she pulls throughout the war. There are twelve different scenes, all suggested by simple door placement and stage re-arranging.

The costumes for this production are aiming to be in the style of a "universal war" look. They should not feel like they are a part of a period drama, with breeches and tights, but they will also not be strictly modern. The war costumes will have throwbacks to historical fashion, but will have a modern enough silhouette that they do not throw the audience into an era too different from ours.





# PLACING THE PRODUCTION

**WAGON**



**YVETTE**



**SERGEANT**



**EILIF**



**SWISS CHEESE**



# ACTIVITY: VIRTUES

**TIME:** 10–40 minutes

**STUDENT SKILLS:**

- Present claims and findings
- Write arguments to support claims

In this activity, students will look at a passage from *Mother Courage and Her Children* in which the Cook argues that the virtues of various historical figures led to their downfall. Students will be asked to compare this passage to the events of the play, in which Mother Courage's children die for their virtues as well. As an expansion of this activity, students are asked to imagine that Mother Courage has a fourth child whose virtue leads to their downfall, and a historical figure to compare them to.

## INTRODUCTION

In *Mother Courage and Her Children*, the Cook sings a song about Solomon:

**Sung:**

You saw sagacious Solomon,  
You know what came of him.  
To him complexities seemed plain,  
He cursed the hour that gave birth to him,  
And saw that everything was vain.  
How great and wise was Solomon.  
But think about his case, alas.  
A useful lesson can be won,  
It's wisdom that had brought him to this pass.  
How fortunate the man with none.

**Spoken:**

Virtue is dangerous today, you're better off if you simply put some food on the table — like maybe a bowl of good hot soup!

In this song, the Cook argues that it is not good to have virtues because they can be fatal to those who possess them. The song goes on to tell of four great figures who meet their fates due to their virtues: Solomon for his wisdom, Julius Caesar for his bravery, Socrates for his honesty, and Saint Martin for his kindness. In the play, Mother Courage's children are likened to these characters and their virtues, and they meet their fates for the same virtues.

## PART 1: HOW DID THESE VIRTUES HURT THEIR OWNERS? (10 minutes, introductory)

In the play, Eliff is compared to Caesar, Swiss Cheese is compared to Socrates, and Kattrin is compared to Saint Martin. Have students work in small groups to discuss the following questions. Each group can address all three children, or the teacher can assign one character to each group to discuss in depth.

- How, exactly, did these virtues lead to their downfall?
- Were the three children really as virtuous as the great figures with their virtues?

Students then report back to the class.

## PART 2: IMAGINING MORE TO THE SONG (30 minutes, in-depth)

Are there other ways that virtues can hurt their owners in bad situations? Think of other historical figures who had something bad happen to them because of something that we would consider to be a virtue. Then add a child to the story of Mother Courage who shares the same virtue, to a lesser extent, and how they meet their end. Have students work in group to each come up with one example, and then report back to the class.

**For example:** Many saints were killed for their piety, since they refused to renounce their beliefs. Mother Courage could have a son who was a pious Catholic but refused to hide his beliefs and got killed for it.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Which historical figures did people tend to choose? Are they considered heroes?

Why might it be dangerous to be virtuous during wartime?

Do you think that any of Mother Courage's children could keep their virtue — bravery, honesty, or kindness — but still survive the play? How?

## ACTIVITY: REVIEW THE PLAY

**TIME:** 30–50 minutes

### STUDENT SKILLS:

- Interpret information presented
- Write narratives to develop imagined experiences

### INTRODUCTION

Have students imagine that they are reviewers of *Mother Courage*. Each reviewer should write a 1–2 page review of the production they saw. Every review should include some of the following:

- A short description of the play
- Opinions on how it was acted
- Opinions on the costumes, set, and overall design of the play
- Recommendations for whom this play would appeal to
- Why this play is important for people to go see (or not)
- The best or most impactful parts of the play

To extend this lesson, students could imagine themselves to be reviewers from different time periods and different social stations, and write their review as if they were coming from that different point of view. Here are a couple suggestions for the personas of reviewers for this play:

- A reporter in Germany at the time the play was written, during the early years of World War II.
- A modern army general who saw the play after coming back from a tour of the Middle East.
- A pacifist student during the Vietnam war.
- A soldier in the 1950's, who received a Medal of Honor in World War II.
- A modern student, who hasn't yet lived through wartime.

Have students write their reviews based on their different chosen identities, and then share with a small group. Have them discuss:

- What did each reviewer focus on?
- How are their reviews of the play similar? How are they different?
- Do their opinions and experiences of war change how they feel about this play?
- Do their distances from war (before, during, or after) impact how you imagined they felt about the play?



THE  
TEMPEST

A TALE REVEALING THE MAGIC  
AND POWER OF THE HUMAN HEART.

Photo: *Island in the Sky* by Shane M. Kalyn

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## PRE-SHOW REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Before watching the show, have students reflect on the following questions, either in a large group, small group, or individually in a journal.

What do you know about wars in history? What do you know about warfare today?

Is war generally portrayed as glorious and honorable, or as horrible and destructive? Are different wars portrayed differently?

Does the outcome of the war change how the battles are portrayed? For example, if we had “won” in Vietnam, would the war still be seen by some as disgraceful or unnecessary?

Do different actors in a war experience it differently? Do people see war differently depending on how close it is to home?

## POST-SHOW REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Here are some questions to discuss with students after the play. Answers may vary and students are encouraged to come up with their own interpretations of the play. There are many correct answers, as long as they are backed up by events from the play.

**In what ways is *Mother Courage* different from more common narrative plays? Think about the structure of the play, the characters, and the presentation.**

- Mother Courage is more episodic. Most plays have scenes that follow one after another in a narrative arc, but this play just shows snapshots that don't create the same type of narrative.
- In most plays, the audience identifies with and roots for the protagonist. It is hard to identify with Mother Courage or the other characters in this play.
- The presentation of this play is more in line with Epic Theatre traditions than a typical narrative play.

**What do you feel is the “moral” of this story? Is there a moral?**

- War takes a toll on everyone, even those who seem to profit from it.
- People who can survive during wartime cannot survive during peace.
- We should think critically about war, since it is a messy business.
- There is not a specific moral — Brecht just wants the audience to think about a lot of ideas.

**In what ways do you sympathize with the characters? In what ways do you not?**

- I sympathize with Katrin, who had a hard life and ended up dying trying to save a village.
- I sympathize with Mother Courage, who tried to balance survival and love for her children.
- I don't sympathize with Mother Courage, since she always lost her children because she was trying to make money or haggle.
- I don't sympathize with anyone, since they are all such caricatures and don't show a depth of emotion.

**What parallels can you draw between the war in *Mother Courage* and modern wars?**

- *Mother Courage* does well during the war, since she profits from selling things to soldiers. This is like Haliburton and other companies profiting from building war machines.
- When good people go to war, they are hurt or come back with PTSD, which is similar to Mother Courage's children dying for their virtues.
- *Mother Courage* depicts a war without showing heroes or valor. Modern wars don't have heroic battles, and we don't hear about historic battles.

# SEATTLE SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

## Mission Statement

With the plays of William Shakespeare at our core, Seattle Shakespeare Company engages our audiences, our artists and our community in the universal human experience inherent in classic drama through the vitality, immediacy and intimacy of live performance and dynamic outreach programs.

## ABOUT US

Seattle Shakespeare Company is the Puget Sound region's year-round, professional, classical theatre. The company's growing success stems from a deep belief in the power and vibrancy of the time-tested words and ideas of Shakespeare and other classical playwrights along with a commitment to artistic excellence on stage. The results have been provocative performances that both challenge and delight audiences while fostering an appreciation for great stage works.

Our combined programs — which include indoor performances, free outdoor productions, regional tours, educator and youth programs — reach across barriers of income, geography, and education to bring classical theatre to Washington State.

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## EDUCATION PROGRAMS

### In-School Residencies, Matinees, and Workshops

- In-School Residencies bring active, customized curriculum into schools across Washington State. Professional teaching artists plan with teachers to tailor each residency to fit the needs and objectives of the classroom. Seattle Shakespeare Company residencies inject vibrant, active exercises into lessons that unlock the text, themes, and actions of a Shakespeare play.
- Student Matinees bring over 3,000 students annually to our mainstage productions in the Seattle Center. Teachers are provided free study guides, and student groups are invited to stay after the show for a free Q&A session with the cast.
- Pre-show and post-show workshops can be booked to accompany mainstage matinees. These workshops include an introduction to the play itself, student activities, and insights into direction and design choices of our specific production.

### Touring Productions

- Fresh and accessible 90-minute productions tour across Washington State each Spring, reaching more than 14,000 students and adults. These nimble productions perform as easily in school gymnasiums as professional theatre facilities. Teachers are provided free study guides and students enjoy free post-show Q&A sessions with the cast.
- Schools have the opportunity to book accompanying in-school residencies with touring productions, led by members of the touring cast and additional teaching artists.

### Camps and Classes

- Our summer "Camp Bill" series in Seattle and Edmonds offers young actors a variety of camps to choose from or combine. Camps range from a One-Week Introduction to a Three-Week Production Intensive, with many options in between.
- In our Fall and Spring after-school "Short Shakes" programs, young actors develop their skills and gain hands-on performance and production experience.
- Seattle Shakespeare Company occasionally offers adult classes and workshops to our community featuring guest artists who work on our stage.