

Powerful Belousova Stars in Brecht's 'Courage'

By [John Freedman](#)

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I was walking to the metro after seeing Mikhail Levitin's production of "Courage" for the Hermitage Theater, and I passed by a young couple.

"What did you think?" I heard the young man ask his female companion.

"I don't know," she said without prejudice.

"I don't know either," the young man quickly responded, almost with relief in his voice.

Levitin, I think, would be pleased to hear that. He knows what the next step is: a conversation, a coming-to-terms that might last 10 minutes or 10 days. The point is that this couple did not leave the show behind when they walked out of the theater. They took it with them, and it would take some time before they really knew what they had experienced.

I'm with those kids. Levitin's rendition of Bertolt Brecht's "Mother Courage and Her Children" is often irritating. It is loud, shrill and long. Much of it happens on the front edge of the stage, so that dust, debris and spittle rain down on those in the front rows. Characters grunt and croak and continually make weird ululating sounds as if they are ready to burst out yodeling. There is something subhuman about many of them, and a couple of them, dammit, get on your nerves.

In short, this is not the kind of show you come away from with a grin on your face and praise burbling on your lips.

It never tries to be that.

Brecht wrote this, one of his most enduring plays, about a hardscrabble woman trying to keep three children alive during the 30 Years' War in the early 17th century. She is an opportunist who profits off of war by catering to those who wage it. With her canteen wagon, she follows the war where it goes, suffering the indignities that soldiers throw at her while selling them everything they will buy.

Levitin gave the play a broader twist. His "Courage" — the Russian variant of which actually means something like "spirit" or "joie de vivre" — is less a play about war than a nasty, aggressive, corrupt world, in which there are few, if any, ways to survive with dignity.

While the main stage at the Hermitage is under reconstruction, "Courage" plays on the large stage at the Fomenko Studio.

Designer Harry Hummel aided Levitin's shift away from the specifics of war in his installation-like set design. A towering cage stands at center stage and is hung with crude, loosely woven ropes and, perhaps, scalps. A circular wind machine in one corner and a conjoined pair of wagon wheels in another are the only hints at Mother Courage's food cart, although they are never used specifically for that purpose. A crude, thick woven rug lies downstage, and it is here where most of the action takes place, threads and lint flying in the air as the actors trample it into a knotted mess over the course of the evening.

Darya Belousova, a leading actress at the Hermitage for 25 years, turns in one of her most powerful performances as Mother Courage. She is the embodiment of a woman who knows weakness is death; therefore, strength is something you stubbornly cling to. In fact, it is something you manufacture out of nothing if you lose it. This makes Belousova's Courage a hard, hard woman, but she also provides convincing and endearing flashes of vulnerability, especially in the company of her mute daughter Katrin (Irina Bogdanova) or her sometimes beau, the company cook (Sergei Oleksyak).

There are some excellent individual performances.

This includes Bogdanova, especially in the final scene as she stands in a field above a city and silently agonizes over whether she should let the townspeople know an invasion is imminent. Boris Romanov, playing a weak and highly compromised priest, delivers a brilliant monologue, in which his character feebly, though eloquently, attempts to justify the notion of war by assuring us that the bliss of peace may exist even in battle.

In the episodic role of a peasant woman fearing for the life of her infant, Alla Chernykh arguably brings us the most emotional, heartfelt moments of the performance. Olga Levitina provides some masterful scenes of comic grotesque as Ivetta, Mother Courage's friend and rival in love. And Galina Morachyova nails her single scene as the aged Mother Courage who must look back on a life in which none of her children survived.

Levitin's "Courage" rarely entertains. Chances are, though, it will get you thinking.

"Courage" (Kurazh), a production of the Hermitage Theater, plays April 12 at 7 p.m. at the Fomenko Studio, located at 29 Naberezhnaya Tarasa Shevchenko. Tel. 650-6742.

www.ermihazh.theatre.ru. Running time: 3 hours, 30 minutes.

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