

# IS BRECHT OUT OF DATE?

Some thoughts on the production of *The Good Soul of Szechuan* at The Young Vic by Verity Smith (June 2008)

Among the more recent initiatives at St James's are theatre groups which Lindsay started organising about a year ago. The first group I joined was one to the Young Vic on the 18<sup>th</sup> June. It was the first time I'd visited this theatre since its recent refurbishment and only the second play by Brecht that I've seen on the stage. At first the combination was a little disconcerting and rather bewildering. I'll explain why. At around 7 pm the open-plan bar and restaurant was a maelstrom of bodies and noise. I was reminded that I tend to associate the theatre with order, but by tradition theatre relates to disorder. Otherwise, why were the theatres in Elizabethan times south of the river (with the taverns, brothels and bear pits) and why did Oliver Cromwell choose to close them?

From the uproar of the bar we proceeded down labyrinthine corridors until we reached the back of the stage. This we crossed and walked down some steps into the auditorium to take our seats. The stage mimicked a cement factory with workers in gum boots, overalls and protective face masks who were going about their tasks in a plodding, robotic manner. The atmosphere was thick with dust and the audience too could have done with masks. A further surprise was to find that the programme (cost £3.-) turned out to be a copy of the play in the very contemporary and effective translation by David Harrower. The audience consisted largely of teenagers who at a guess were studying Brecht for A level Drama. Whenever the teacher of one of these groups crossed the stage to join the audience, the young people would whistle and

applaud. How pleased Brecht would have been to see the many ways in which the demarcation line between real life and play-acting was being blurred: in your seat you could read the play before the piece itself was performed or watch bags of cement going down a chute; you could also watch members of the audience being applauded as they crossed the stage, which already had actors and action on it. In this way, the two components in the theatrical space – spectators and actors – merged with the utmost ease when the play itself began.

There is little point in commenting on the contents of Brecht's unnuanced political fable. Brecht always used a very broad brush and, like Dickens before him, was a master of exaggeration and caricature. Yet *The Good Soul* (with reason, Harrower prefers the term soul to the earlier "woman") contains in the central character of Shen Te/Shui Ta a male/female figure with a strong dramatic impact. Jane Horrocks, who is small and slight, made the virtuous Shen Te delicate and flowerlike. The adoption of a black suit, brimmed hat and stabbing gestures gave her an air of menace in the role of her male alter ego, the hard and pragmatic Shui Ta. The three gods were done up as bureaucrats or government inspectors. Their lofty disengagement from the harsh economic realities of the slum dwellers of Szechuan are summarised by the First God when he says: "I admit I know nothing of business. Perhaps we should find out what normal practice is in such matters. Business! Is it absolutely necessary? It's everywhere nowadays. I mean, did the Seven Benevolent Kings do business? Did Kung the Just sell fish?"

Two and a half hours of didacticism may seem like two hours too long for a sophisticated London audience. This said, it seemed from the response of the teenagers to both the play and

the production that they were not going to lose their interest in live theatre in a hurry.

A further point is that although Brecht's unnuanced attacks on capitalism may not appeal to (the maturer components of) a London audience, they still have the keenest relevance in the vast slums and shanty towns of the developing world. In this context it isn't in the least surprising that the brilliant Brazilian playwright and theatre director, Augusto Boal, should have acknowledged his debt to Brecht. Would not the poor of Lagos, Calcutta or Mexico City agree with Shui Ta when he says:

This city is in crisis. It's beyond help – no one can change anything here. Someone wrote a poem eleven hundred years ago and things are still the same as then:

When the Governor was asked what was needed  
To help the city's freezing poor, he replied,  
'A blanket ten thousand feet long  
To cover the suburbs.'

Verity Smith

[st-james-piccadilly.org](http://st-james-piccadilly.org)