

# CARAVAN THEATRE

1555 MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE • CAMBRIDGE, MASS. 02138

TELEPHONES 491-9579 868-8520

## Brecht's 'Exception' Passing Water

### **The Exception and the Rule,**

by Bertolt Brecht

Director: David S. Klein

Lights and set: Katherine Belz

Costumes: Katherine Belz and Barbara Fleischmann

Merchant . . . Aili Singer

Guide . . . Peter Kovner

Carrier . . . Joe Volpe

Judge . . . Stan Edelson

BY ALAN LEVITAN

When Sir Philip Sidney, that elegant soldier, scholar, courtier of the Renaissance, lay dying at the Battle of Zutphen, apocryphal legend has it that upon being offered water to drink by a wounded common soldier at his side, he refused it with "Thy need is greater than mine." That refusal was stellar humanity indeed, and ample fodder for the idolatry of a later age. Bert Brecht, on the other hand, worshipped few idols; when he concerned himself with passing water it was either to relieve himself or to teach us a very different lesson.

Brecht's *The Exception and the Rule* was written in 1930, and it remains his most bitter play. In the starkest and most frankly didactic mode, a Prologue cautions us to mistrust the simplest actions of man. A merchant introduces himself ("he" is played, tautly, by an actress). He must transport certain goods over a desert in order to complete a capitalist "deal" successfully. He has competition, and he's in a rush.

The merchant takes with him a guide and a carrier. The carrier is driven mercilessly with his burden upon his back; the guide, willing to whip the carrier when commanded to do so by the merchant, nevertheless can manage to join the carrier in friendly conversation; the carrier bears no visible grudge against the way things are. Midway on the journey, the merchant dismisses the guide, suspecting him of collusion with the carrier. The guide, before leaving, gives the carrier an extra flask of water to sustain him over the desert—water the merchant must not know about.

Once in the desert, the merchant and the carrier lose their way and are overcome with thirst. The carrier, though he has every reason to hate the merchant, decides to share his extra water with him. (This, by the way, is not a sentimental gesture of goodness; the carrier realizes that if the merchant should die, the carrier will be blamed for his death.) The merchant, who has been fantasizing about the carrier's hatred for him (it is not true, of course; the carrier is a simple and accepting man), misinterprets the carrier's unexpected approach with the water flask. The merchant is sure that the carrier means to murder him; he quickly takes out a gun and shoots the carrier dead.

The carrier's widow later brings charges against the merchant. But the presiding judge, in his infinite wisdom, explains that since the carrier had every reason to hate

the merchant, any show of sympathetic humanity toward the merchant would obviously be an exception rather than the rule; the merchant therefore acted according to the rule, practically and with common sense. Verdict: innocent. A case of theoretical self-defense.

Caravan Theater's production is as stark and bitter as the text. The props and costumes are minimal, timeless, and always effective. The rhythmic incantatory nature of much of the speech is beautifully underlined by accompanying drum-beats and well-placed foot-stomping. The atmosphere is cold, merciless, bare. The six songs in the play (Paul Dessau's original music is not used in this production) are delivered as spoken chants, almost a *sprechgesang*, with foot-beats and drum-beats dinning the moral home.

Aili Singer is hard and cynical in her warped reasonableness as the merchant; the casting of a woman in the role makes the edge of cruelty sharper, less dependent upon stereotyped expectation. Joe Volpe is superb as the carrier (and later, as the carrier's widow); he has an extraordinarily expressive face, in constant flux to match each station of his cross. There is, properly, nothing sentimental to be felt anywhere. Peter Kovner, as the guide, is innocently affable and equivocating. And Stan Edelson, having switched in this production from directing to acting, is effectively singleminded as the judge for whom "humanity is an exception." The direction, by David S. Klein, has caught perfectly (as has always been the case with Caravan's approach to Brecht) the icy and relentless cynicism of Brecht's vision. With such water-parables as these, Brecht too is offering us a gift, unpalatable though it may be. Our need is greater than ever.

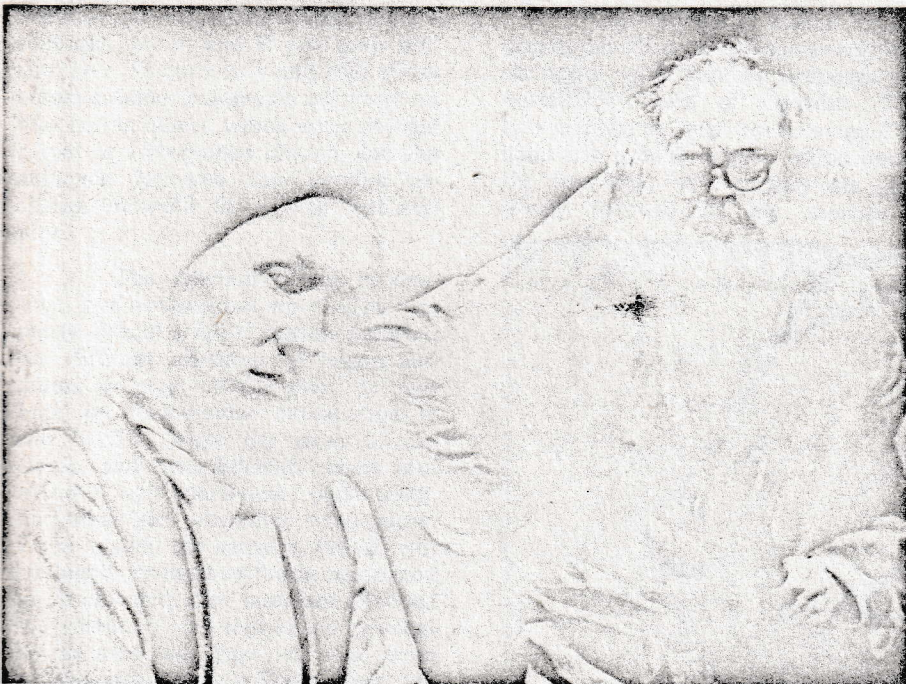


*Joe Volpe and Peter Kovner in Brecht's "The Exception and the Rule" at the Caravan Theater.*

## CARAVAN THEATRE

### The Exception and the Rule

*The Exception and the Rule* is the last, and probably the bleakest, of Bertolt Brecht's "didactic" plays. In their production, which closed March 25, Caravan Theater took this doctrinal, uneven script and a few cardboard boxes and forged a harrowing hour of psychological tension. This was a considerable achievement, even though the illusion of realism eventually collapsed under the weight of the play's message.



A merchant, a guide, and a carrier bent double under a load of boxes are racing across the desert. The merchant drives the others mercilessly in order to outdistance his competitors. At the last outpost of civilization, he hears his men commiserating. The merchant is very aware that they have every reason to hate him, and he dismisses the guide so as to have only one enemy in the unpoliced desert. The carrier, however, is an exception to the rule of hatred between oppressor and oppressed: he sings as he runs with his burden, he sets up his master's tent although his arm has just been broken in a river crossing, and finally, lost in the desert, he offers the merchant a flask of water he has been

hiding, reasoning that if he doesn't, and they are found, he'll be put on trial. The merchant mistakes the flask for a stone and shoots the carrier dead.

In the last scene, Brecht drives his none-too-subtle point home at length. The carrier's widow demands justice before a tribunal. The judge appears to sympathize, and questions the merchant harshly. The guide produces the water flask, and the judge confronts the merchant with it. But the merchant points out that he had no reason whatever to think his

strong characterization and nearly constant rhythmic motion. The race across the desert was driven by insistent drumming on boxes offstage. Chanted lines, chanted songs, foot-steps, and heavy breathing evoked both tension and a feeling of ritual. When the race stopped for some reason, it stopped with a thump, and the relief was palpable. When it began again, the rhythmic noise was a burden like the carrier's.

The merchant was played by Aili Singer with grating authority and swagger. Staring monomaniacally out at the audience through mauve-colored glasses, hammering out the beat of the race on a canteen on her hip, she captured attention at once and kept it until the tribunal scene, when everything fell apart. The merchant suffers the conflict of both exploiter and exploited in his own constantly increasing paranoia. As they get further out into the desert, the carrier — with a broken arm, weary, lost, thirsty — should have had more and more reason to hate the merchant, and Singer played the merchant's awareness of this and his growing fear very skillfully, making it strong enough to be passionate, but always stopping before it went over the edge into fantasy.

Joe Volpe used fluid physical grace to portray the carrier's humanness. All his motions were smooth, flowed into one another. His voice was as soft as the merchant's was harsh, his gaze as appealing as the merchant's was cold: in motion and tone they complemented each other perfectly, and the production was best in the

slave was offering him water: in deciding to shoot he had to go by the rule, not the exception. The judge agrees and dismisses the widow's plea. At the end, the cast addresses the audience:

*What here is common should  
astonish you  
What here's the rule, recognize as  
an abuse  
And where you have recognized  
an abuse  
Provide a remedy!*

It's almost impossible to make this kind of thing work on stage. Caravan Theater succeeded through



40 / *Boston Review of the Arts* June / 72

them doesn't mind, even after the doors close, because he feels he still has his inner freedom — as long as he doesn't make any choices. The other

Beckett's *Cascando*, originally a radio play, is not so easy to decipher. The bag is the author's head, inhabited by Opener, Words, and Music, and the

dramatic freedom still burns.

Lee Richmond