

Angel in disguise

THEATRE: Michael Billington on a sedate but powerful Brecht at the Olivier

ACCORDING to Eric Bentley, Brecht once said that if world socialism did not come about his works would probably have no future at all. Socialism is apparently in retreat, and yet, on the evidence of Deborah Warner's slow-moving but extremely powerful production of *The Good Person of Sichuan* at the Olivier, Brecht retains his extraordinary theatrical hold.

How does one explain this paradox? Part of the answer is that *The Good Person* (completed in Finland in 1941 but here presented in the revised Santa Monica version of 1942) is very different from the early didactic pieces: it is an ironic parable about the impossibility of living a good life in an imperfect society. But the real answer is that Brecht, contrary to the popular image of him as a cold-hearted propagandist, was, at his best, an extremely emotional storyteller with a poetic sense of theatre.

This play certainly proves the point. It begins with the gods descending to earth in search of a good human being. Widely rebuffed, they are finally given shelter by Shen Te, a penniless prostitute. They reward her with money which enables her to buy a small tobaccoist's shop. But when she is exploited by all and sundry, she has to proceed furtively by assuming the identity of her ruthless male cousin, Shui Ta. If Brecht were simply a Marxist message peddler, the story could end there. What happens is that he goes on multiplying the ironies. Shen Te falls in love with an unemployed male prostitute who needs \$500 to buy himself a job trying to raise the money in the guise of Shui Ta, the heroine tragically realises that it is her capitalist alter ego to whom her lover truly responds. Abandoned and pregnant, she is forced permanently to revert to the role of Shui Ta to restore her fortunes or becoming, in this version, a prosperous opium-dealer. At which point she is accused of having murdered Shen Te and is tried before the self-same gods who were vainly seeking virtue.

Brecht's general point is clear enough: that, in the world as it is, the good person requires a bad half if he or she is to survive. Psychologically, it strikes me as an extremely complex play in which Brecht is dramatising the abject and Hyde nature of his own personality: it was the Shui Ta side of Brecht, for instance, that always behaved as if the rights to *The Threepenny Opera* were exclusively his. What the play actually says is not just that we must change the world but that good and evil are inextricably mixed up in the human personality: a point made when Shen Te cries (in Michael Hofman's translation) "I am the bad person whose deeds have been described by everyone."

The defect of Deborah Warner's production is that every scene is played at the same slow, painstaking tempo: its virtue is that it grasps the point that Brecht was one of the most emotional dramatists of the century. It also gets from Fiona Shaw as the heroine a truly magnificent performance that realises that Shen Te and Shui Ta are not simply class opposites but two sides of the same personality.

Ms Shaw's Shen Te is no bouncy whore but a workaholic in a floral frock taken back by the consequences of her own virtue. "How can I be good," she reasonably enquires, "when everything is so expensive?" Her Shui Ta, with white half-mask, pencil moustache and black trilby, is a Chicago hood. But like Shen Te, her mane of curly hair, never quite lets us forget the woman under death; and, in the scene when she realises her lover will abandon her, she conveys an overpowering sense of isolation by the very stillness of her body. Ms Shaw clearly delineates the difference between the angel of the suburbs and the graying, competitive capitalist. But her secret is that (following Brecht) she constantly makes us aware of the emotional cost of her disguise and of the ultimate insupportability of her two selves. Left to her own devices by the gods, her final cry of "Help!" also echoes in one's head as it probably still does in the Olivier roof.

Elsewhere the production strikes me as a touch over-emphatic. The parasites and would-be relatives who cling to Shen Te are played as George Grouce caricatures with an astonishing assortment of peepers, eye-brows and prognathous jaws, historically legitimate but missing that element of pseudo-Orwellianism with which Brecht deftly surrounds his fable. Sue Halse's design, all brutalist concrete, peeling signs and suspended bicycles, is also rather tidy on the eyes and misses that element of aesthetic lightness you find in the Berliner Ensemble.

But the production handles the gods wryly as interventionist toadie-butted civil servants (one of them looks so like Robertson Hare I had expected him to cry "O Meribay Tydill"). Peter Brown is also admirable as the shillies airman, Yang Sun, here reduced to a floor-crawling desperation in his craving for drugs. And the two-act structure is to the water-seller, Wang, his contemporary spy vet and a bicycle that seems like an extension of his body.

But, despite occasional longeurs, the evening still works; and the reason is that Brecht is not reading us a lecture but dramatising his own divided self and reminding us that Utopia, while worth striving for, is damnably difficult to achieve.



A quick drag... Fiona Shaw plays Shin Te disguised as her male cousin Shui Ta. PHOTOGRAPH: NEIL LEBERT

Sex in the shadows with Blackeyes and a soldier's guide to surviving the British army

Potter's peepshow

Television

Hugh HEBERT

FAIRY tales and uncles with sticky sweats are not to be trusted. "There's no looking in fairy tales, Uncle Maurice," says his niece Jessica. Oh no? The camera has already scanned all over the silvery made-manipulations that in classier shops tend to be draped in tissue paper so as not to offend frightened Blackeyes (BBC) into dark corners of the window display, choosing her doll.

We have listened in on heavy breathing, on supplications like "Spi on me! Spi on me!" and the first scene is Gettin' Sentimental Over You. Where could you be but in a Dennis Potter fantasy?

The viable mechanics of his latest machine for goosing the bourgeoisie are Potter patiens. Blackeyes (Gina Bellman) is a beautiful, exploited model in a novel written by Kingsley (Michael Gough). Kingsley is the quintessential dirty old man, all grubby long-johns, fat, got fantasies, and mad-in-self-pity.

He draws on the modelling life of Jessica (Carol Royle). In his first episode, Blackeyes catches a bunch of marketing men looking for a model to promote their new body lotion. "Use it! Use it!" they chant, and

fished out of a lake. The writer/character contrivance runs through lots of Potter's work, his obsessive connection between sex and death is as electric as ever. But so far, this time he has played it close to fate. Shrapnel as the detective Blake is a serious comic conspiracy. With three episodes to come you have to suspend not just disbelief but judgment.

As director, his crude foreplay fumbles a bit. He shoots the phallic bottle of body lotion, which stands on a table, centred on Blackeyes's crotch. This won't be the only reason for feminist displeasure, and it won't be the last. Unless you believe you can expose exploitation without being an exploiter.

So here we are again in Potter's land of shadows. "Do we invent ourselves or have other people done it for us?" Dennis the Narrator asks. "Do we think, or are we thought?" Do we know for sure that Jessica hasn't invented her uncle and his book end, within that, her alter ego Blackeyes? Is her snore just cooperation at the clichés inherent in fantasy? And what about the "we"!

Blackeyes that Kingsley suddenly spots there in the street as he wakes from a hazy dream induced by cuddling his teddy bear? Are they all invented by the Bear?

THE first of the two films in Paul Verhoeven's fine *Basic Instinct* (BBC2) offered the frankest "squads" views of the army I can recall. Their complaints were deeply felt and sharply expressed. They had spent two years in Northern Ireland, and were now in Berlin on what they saw as silly ceremonial duties over there, in the summer, before the city became the great peace conduit between East and West.

In Ireland they had suffered an appalling blow — theirs was the unit that lost eight men when the IRA blew up a coach in October last year. Afterwards the survivors were sent straight to the trenches of South Armagh's border, and some were bitter about the lack of chance to grieve their friends or attend their funerals in England.

They were scornful about of fliers straight from Sandhurst telling men who had been in

Ireland 18 months how to be a soldier.

In Berlin, said one corporal, "All of a sudden there's a different kind of bullshit: it's inspections, it's getting treated like a mares, getting run up and down the parade ground doing stupid little duties which, because they've been going on for 45 years, the British army still believes they've got to do them now."

And with the shrewdness of the determined survivor, they made it clear they had been promised they would not be punished for anything they said; but that they had also been told that it would "not be in our interest" to say anything too bad about the good old British army.

By comparison, apart from a few beads about being undermined and overruled, the matching documentary made under the control of the officers was pure recruitment PR. Except when it was pure SNAK. "You've got a great big thumb mark right in the middle of your buckle," says the inspecting officer on parade. Then he sniffs "Afterwards? If this was a French parade I'd kiss you."

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