

# Eszter Judit Ozsváth

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## War of Triangles

### Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* [Kurázsi mama és gyermekei] at the National Theatre

According to the Dictionary of the Hungarian Language, the word “kurázsi” means intrepidity, resolute boldness and explicitly “daring” bravery, i.e., a set of virtues that are indispensable for successful survival in times of war. However, this “daring” does not hold water, especially if the object of our empathy and then of our alienation is a woman from the hinterland, namely Anna Fierling, a sutler, better known as Mother Courage. Bertolt Brecht, the author, said that the main message of his play was “[t]hat in wartime the big profits are not made by little people. That war, which is a continuation of business by other means, makes human virtues fatal even to their possessors. That no sacrifice is too great for the struggle against war.”<sup>1</sup> It was in this Brechtian spirit that on 12 January 2024 the National Theatre premiered *Mother Courage and Her Children*, directed by the world-renowned Greek theatre director Theodoros Terzopoulos, with Nelli Szűcs's benefit performance in a mystery play of a Godless religious war, in the role of the protagonist who, dressed in a flamenco dress, exchanges morality for profit.

Since the basic conflicts of the drama are concentrated in the image of a woman who wants to profit from the war while surviving and perhaps wishing the war to end, it is important to note that Terzopoulos returned to Hungary to stage *Mother Courage* directly because he had promised the title role to Nelli Szűcs. Brecht's drama originally premiered on 19 April 1941 at the Schauspielhaus in Zurich, and in 1961, a few years after Brecht's death, it was made into a film,

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<sup>1</sup> Dalos, László. 1958. “Kurázsi mama közeleg...” *Film–Színház–Muzsika* 1: 6–7.

*Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*, in which Brecht's widow, Helene Weigel played Mother Courage. Later, famous actresses such as Meryl Streep, Diana Rigg, Anne Bancroft and Fiona Shaw took on the role of the sutler. Before 1956, of Brecht's works, only the Vígszínház premiere of *The Threepenny Opera* took place in Hungary in 1930, only to be performed again in 1945, in the Solti György Hall of the Music Academy, directed by András Rácz. The first premiere of *Mother Courage and Her Children* (at that time still titled *Courage*, although the options *Mother Courage/Braveness* had already been considered for the title without mentioning the children) was held on 24 January 1958 at the Madách Theatre, directed by Géza Pártos, with Manyi Kiss in the title role. Later, the title role was played by great actresses, including Irén Psota<sup>2</sup> (Madách Theatre, Budapest, 1973), Éva Olsavszky (Csiky Gergely Theatre, Kaposvár, 1973), Eszter Szakács (Hevesi Sándor Theatre, Zalaegerszeg, 1985), Krisztina Peremartoni (Ódry Stage, Budapest, 1988), Kati Egri (Hevesi Sándor Theatre, Zalaegerszeg, 1999), Erzsébet Kútvölgyi (Vígszínház, Budapest, 2000), Eszter Vörös (Katona József Theatre, Kecskemét, 2004), and Kati Lázár<sup>3</sup> (Csiky Gergely Theatre, Kaposvár, 1989)—with the latter's leading role being a real curiosity, since this 1989 Kaposvár production by Péter Gothár set the basic Brechtian situation in the Second World War. The play was also staged with a special solution in 1991 in the Novi Sad Theatre<sup>4</sup> by Lajos Soltis, quadrupling Mother Courage's character, i.e., dividing the role among four actresses (Irén Ábrahám, Katalin Ladik, Ibi Romhányi and Júlia N. Kiss). A similar multiplication of the protagonist characterised Sándor Zsótér's second *Mother Courage* production, since this 2006 production at the University of Theatre and Film Arts, titled *Mother K*, had three Mothers Courage appearing on stage, under the names K1, K2 and K3 (Nóra Diána Takács, Diána Magdolna Kiss, Hella Roszik), in a probable intent to utilise a Brechtian alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*).

2 Before Psota had matured into the role of Mother Courage by 1973, in the 1958 Hungarian premiere she played Katrin, the mute daughter, with Manyi Kiss as Mother. Psota's Katrin was Anna Nagy, while the two sons of Mother Courage were played by János Papp (Eilif) and Miklós Kalocsay (Schweizerkas). A special feature of the 1973 production was the oak tree, symbolic of the vulnerability of the little man, from which the leaves almost completely disappeared by the end of the performance—as did the suspicion of the audience that Mother Courage was responsible for all that she was destined.

3 Alongside Kati Lázár as Mother Courage, Judit Pogány played Katrin.

4 A few days before the premiere in Novi Sad, a private theatre in Belgrade also performed *Mother Courage and Her Children*, with some dramaturgical alterations, as they wrote Brecht himself and his wife Helene Weigel into the framework of the performance.



Picture 1. Ágota Szilágyi, Raul Gabriel Ionescu, Bence János Bognár, Benjámín Dominik Kerék, Dániel Séra, Tamás Jakab, Péter Juhász, Márk Wettstein and in the foreground Roland Bordás in National Theatre's *Mother Courage and Her Children*, January 10, 2024 (Photo: Eöri Szabó Zsolt)

The primary aim of this kind of alienation is for spectators not to identify emotionally with the characters, but to distance themselves from them and think critically about what they see, thus interpreting war and the way people are treated in a given social and political context. As Terzopoulos believes, "[t]oday we are again living through a series of wars, which, for the first twenty-

four hours of their outbreak, shock us, shake us, then we forget about them and no longer care. The aim of this production is to help sustain remembrance in a system whose machinery is entirely based on forgetting. Hybrid warfare goes hand in hand with oblivion, so it is imperative that we all become aware and see what is happening around us, how far man has devolved, and what human nature is capable of".<sup>5</sup> Terzopoulos has previously directed Brecht's work, first at the National Theatre of Northern Greece in 1983 and most recently seven years ago at the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St Petersburg, the memory of which permeates the black and red stage design at the Nemzeti (Hungarian National Theatre), the wagon-coffin, the spectacle of Kattrin colouring with red paint in her nightgown and boots, dyed red, and the rhythmic movements changing from scene to scene of the soldiers marching diagonally across the stage, dividing it into two triangles. While *Mother Courage* in the St Petersburg production was at the same time less rambunctious, but much older and more demonic, and her children were also captured by older soldiers (the soldiers of the National Theatre are students of the Rippl-Rónai Faculty of Arts of Szent István University, majoring in acting), the knives, military tunics, ugly dolls, books and pictures<sup>6</sup> hanging<sup>7</sup> in the back of the stage are already adapted not only to the historical context of Hungary but also to a "more intimate" *Mother Courage* production compared to the one in St Petersburg. Beyond the grand-stage production, it is practically a chamber piece, and would be better suited as a valid and shocking drama in its own right, without stylisation, in addition to the expressive excess of the conflict tableaux and their static cacophony of meaning.

Apart from the coffin-shaped wagon and the red, perhaps blood-soaked banknotes with a female portrait bearing resemblance to Elizabeth II, the starkly stripped-down stage set, devoid of utilitarian objects, evokes the nihilism of war, in which there are no ruins to tear down or repurposed, and in which only the military presence and the repetitions of violent motifs symbolise

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5 Lukácsy, György. 2023. "Az ember mint tőzsdei áru – Theodórosz Terzopulosz a Kurázsi mamáról, az árulások hasznáról, a pénz fétiséről és a színészek lelkéről". *Nemzeti Magazin* XI, 4: 8–11.

6 The performance features portraits from 1956, courtesy of the VERITAS Historical Research Institute and Archives.

7 Terzopoulos' visual world is characterised by a multitude of symbolic objects hanging in the background with the basic function of multiplying and magnifying the object(s) displayed on the stage, thus demonstrating the infinite possible variations in the outcome of a situation (for example, in *The Bacchae*, also presented at the National Theatre in 2022, Terzopoulos used bottles containing red liquid, resembling wine sampling thief-tubes and/or infusion bags).



Picture 2. Ádám Schnell, Nelli Szűcs and József Varga in National Theatre's *Mother Courage and Her Children*, January 10, 2024 (Photo: Eöri Szabó Zsolt)

everything that is happening in the “outside world”. The scenes with circus-like processions combined with elements of movement theatre, the money thrown as confetti, and the whole *danse macabre* is united—as if by a ringmaster—by the character of Death/Narrator, played by Roland Bordás,<sup>8</sup> who grins devilishly at the front of the stage or in the orchestra pit. Although the time of the stage events passes, it remains unchanged, and it is not until the very end of the performance that the audience breaks out of the tense monotony with the silent lamentations of the Second Peasant Woman (Mari Nagy), forced to watch her son being tortured. All this is the result of a workshop based on Terzopoulos’s method of exploration, experimentation and self-awareness, focusing on elementary concepts such as *breath*, *energy* and *time* as pillars of the physical and scenic presence of the actor’s (body). It is the combination of these components that is the basis of Terzopoulos’ method, summarised

<sup>8</sup> His character is an exciting choice, as Bordás played the role of Dionysus in *The Bacchantes*.

in his book *Dionüszosz visszatérése* (The Return of Dionysos) published by the University of Theatre and Film Arts in 2023. During the training sessions mentioned in the book, the actor's body is divided into "triangles" with energy flowing across them, and although Terzopoulos perfected his exercises in the context of staging ancient drama, they are also reflected in the performance of the actors in *Mother Courage*. Nelli Szűcs's modern, pantomime-painted sutler is depicted as a flamenco dancer holding her bent arms towards the sky, wearing a military belt pouch. It is only in a "formation" that she can coexist on the stage with her children, Eiliff (Péter Herczeg), schematised into a "robot", and the manipulable Schweizerkas (whose name is shortened to Stüsszi in other Hungarian performances, played here by József Kovács S), as well as Katrin (Anna Gizella Kiss, student), who has been diminished into an angel-like figure, and Mother Courage's cynical figure, who crosses moral boundaries, seems closer to the character of Death or Yvette,<sup>9</sup> the prostitute (Anita Polyák, student). In the escalating aggression of the war, the image of the trio of children left to their own devices is replaced by this trio of profit-seekers, and alongside them, the three characters with the most lines and equally painted faces are present as another "triangle": Mother Courage, the sexually overheated, petty Priest (Ádám Schnell) and the clodhopping Cook (József Varga), who is eager to make profit.

An excellent example of Brechtian alienation is also associated with these figures. In the third scene of the drama, the Cook and the Priest are discussing the politics of the Thirty Years' War with Mother Courage. The cook already strikes a critical note here, cleverly detecting the ironic overtones of the priest's remarks. Alienation in this episode, in fact, is originally present as a means of spatial organisation, as Brecht places the three characters (or one of the triangles) behind Mama Courage's wagon. Simultaneously Katrin tries on Yvette's red hat and shoes. Here Brecht originally moves the trio with Mother Courage behind the wagon to prevent the spectator from identifying with their argument, while Terzopoulos places them in the focus, and Katrin and Yvette's interactions (which in this version are more of mutual sympathy) take place either offstage or on the edge of the stage. This 'shift of focus' also shows how the staging focuses on a kind of critique of the system of capitalism, rather than on an

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9 The main symbol of Yvette's monetised sexuality is her red clothing, especially her red stilettos, which were also used in a similarly prominent way to emphasise essential femininity in Silviu Purcărete's *Az ember tragédiája* (The Tragedy of Man, 2021), where the red patent-leather stilettos were the accessory of the ever-present Eve.





Picture 3. Nelli Szűcs in National Theatre's *Mother Courage and Her Children*, January 10, 2024 (Photo: Eöri Szabó Zsolt)

individual's 'quest' (Kattrin, influenced by Yvette, is trying out her femininity, once this is not how her own mother makes "profit" from it in the war).

The big red cross, a symbol on the poster of the performance, is also a recurring symbol of the performance. It is a fascinating addition, since the war, waged for religious motives, has lost all religious qualities, and its participants are engaged in a kind of godless crusade for material goods. Accordingly, the twelve scenes of the drama are not separated by psalms, but by the somewhat off-pitch songs also used in the original Brechtian concept. However, instead of accompanying the plot or being integrated into the dramatic illusion, music in Brecht's theatre takes on a reality of its own, sometimes completely separated from the other elements of the play. This placing of music in its own reality breaks the dramatic illusion, breaking it down into its components. The events are accompanied throughout by Paul Dessau's classical melodies, composed for the play, in live musical form, with the only melody that fits the illusion, a lament sung at the end of the performance by Theodoros Terzopoulos.

The National Theatre's 2024 production of *Mother Courage and Her Children*, while not offering a way out of the labyrinth of war horrors, does not attempt to moralize the story of the mother who ultimately pays the highest possible price. It is an objective and long war, also drawn out on stage, broken down into short revolutions, with perhaps the most frightening thing about the whole grotesque pantomime being its episodic, stale topicality. Brecht's original intention was to reflect upon the tragic duality of war and the ensuing social injustices, and also to draw the audience's attention to the general failings of human nature, which not only cause physical destruction but also result in moral and ethical loss, and as Miklós Szinétár once pointed out, "Brecht's plays are more successful than the theories on which he based them".<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Szinétár, Miklós. 1958. "Brecht és a modern színház". *Nagyvilág* 10: 1538–1539.