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## Bertolt Brecht in Lamorinda

By Sophie Braccini



From left: Michael Craigen, Karen Hernandez, and Jack Clifford Photo Matthew Royce

It is quite marvelous to be able to immerse oneself in intelligent entertainment right here at home in Lamorinda at Saint Mary's College. That's what higher education institutions are for - to challenge us to think. The college is providing another great opportunity with Bertolt Brecht's play "The Good Person of Setzuan" at the LeFevre Theatre April 23-26. An excellent performance by any standard, this rendition of the great 20th-century playwright is both funny and stimulating.

The play takes place in the Chinese province of Setzuan in the 1930s. We are mingling in the lives of mostly poor people, all trying to survive at any cost, with not much empathy for their fellow human beings. There come three gods in search for someone good. The only one they can find is Shen Te, a young prostitute who can never say no when someone appeals to her good heart. She will host the gods, and as a reward, they will give her money to start a small business of her own. But

predators of all types abuse her generosity, and she can't hold on to it for very long. In order to survive, she invents a cousin, the harsh Shui Ta, whom she impersonates at times. But there comes a time when the duality is not possible to sustain.

The play illustrates many Brechtian themes - one of them, a contradiction. As Saint Mary's art theory and practice professor Peter Freund explained during a pre-talk to the play, Brecht wrote plays to affect audiences and get them to think. "I think that what he wanted was for the audience to cultivate a productive affection for contradiction," he said. Here the contradiction lives in the same person, Shen Te and Shui Ta, the good doer who is going to her ruin and the selfish capitalist who thrives financially. Emily Klein, who teaches modern drama and performance and women's and gender studies at Saint Mary's, explained that Brecht wanted to create what he called epic theater, as opposed to a dramatic one where people identify with the characters. Here the spectator's mind is engaged as the author shows the troubling complexity of society and human beings. "He said that we needed a theater that takes an issue and looks at it from different perspectives," said Klein.

Like in "The Three Penny Opera," there is an underlying theme of social justice in the play. Brecht also shows the complexity of individuals. Yang Sun, the pilot who Shen Te falls in love with, is completely selfish, but could be good in better circumstances. Many characters are humorous - the gods, especially. And if the play was created to make people think, it is also ironic and funny.

What better compliment to give to the cast than to say that one completely forgets those are students on stage. Sometimes the diction could slow down a tad to enjoy Brecht's wonderfully crafted dialogue more clearly, but that could be said of some professional actors, too. Special kudos goes to Karen Hernandez impersonating the good person of Setzuan, whose credibility as both a male and female character is key to the success of the play.

Saint Mary's theater professor Daniel Larlham directed the play, with Deanna Zibello as scenic designer. "I choose this play because it has a lot of juicy roles for the students and because it resonates with Saint Mary's mission toward social justice," said the young professor. "The play is about the possibility or not of goodness, generosity and compassion in a social world where people are pursuing their self-interest most of the time."

Zibello's scenic work makes the 'Brechtian' choice of showing all of the accessories to remove

the magic of theater. "We took as our design concept Brecht's idea of laying bare the apparatus," she explained. It means that all the lighting instruments are visible; the scenery is made of raw material, and spectators see everything that's happening at all levels.

Upcoming performances are at 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, April 23-25 and at 2 p.m. Sunday, April 26. Tickets can be purchased at <http://www.stmarys-ca.edu/the-good-person-of-setzuan> or the box office on the evening of the play. Signs on campus clearly direct spectators to the theater.

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