

# STYLE

Marking the centenary of Bertolt Brecht, Stanford Summer Theater stages a new revue of his songs. Robert Hurwitz reviews. [B-7]



COMICS

B-5 ANN LANDERS B-7

SAN FRANCISCO EXAMINER

★ Monday, July 20, 1998 B-7

## Living

# A fitting tribute to Brecht

Intriguing 'Shark' surfaces at Summer Theater

By Robert Hurwitz  
EXAMINER THEATER CRITIC

**S**TANFORD — The thin, nasal, unmistakable voice of Bertolt Brecht singing "Moritat" on the grainy old recording is just the right touch. It's Brecht's best-known song, for one thing — the ubiquitous "Mack the Knife" — not to mention the song from which the Stanford Summer Theater's Brecht/Weill cabaret "When the Shark Bites" draws its title. And it's an apt way to close a centennial tribute to the great German playwright and poet.

The only Bay Area show marking Brecht's centenary, I might add. Oddly, given Brecht's overwhelming (and salutary) influence on the development of 20th century drama, not one of our principal or even mid-level theater companies is staging one of his plays. Not ACT, which hasn't done Brecht since 1974. Not Berkeley Rep, which has more of a commitment to Brechtian theater. Not San Jose Rep, which replaced a planned production of "Happy End" (a play disowned by Brecht anyway) with another revival of its evergreen Cole Porter revue.

SST, the professional wing of Stanford's drama department, under the direction of Rush Rehm, is filling the void with "Shark" to open its second season. Created by Polish National Theatre (Teatr Narodowy) veterans Aleksandra Wolska (the director) and Jarek Truszczyński (who plays Brecht), it opened Friday for a four-week run, then goes to the International Festival of Experimental Theater in Shanghai in October.

It's a show that grows on you during the course of its two hours. Which is fortunate, because it doesn't start particularly well. Billed as "A Brecht/Weill Cabaret," "Shark" opens more like a recital. One actor after another makes an appearance and attempts a dramatic rendition of one of the great songs from "Happy End" or "The Threepenny Opera."

The voices are strong but the performers — mostly current or recent Stanford students — lack the experience to fully explore the songs as drama. Joya Martuscello's lovely rendition of "Surabaya Johnny" hits all the right notes but



Telory Williamson, left, and Jarek Truszczyński in "When the Shark Bites: A Brecht/Weill Cabaret"

barely suggests its deeply ingrained pain and aching anger. Fez Abramson's wide-eyed delivery of "Pirate Jenny" makes the brutalized prostitute's awesome anthem of vengeance look more like dementia.

It's not until five songs have received similarly unsatisfactory treatment that Truszczyński's Brecht steps in to stop the show — looking quite Brechtian in his rumpled black leather jacket, round glasses and very short hair (but no cigar). The device is a cliché, but the understated, focused intensity of Truszczyński's performance commands attention.

From that moment, "Shark" gets increasingly interesting. Truszczyński and Wolska's principle device is a kind of dream play — Brecht falls asleep on a pile of books — in which Brecht songs, poems and bits of plays are intercut with his interrogation by the House Un-American Activities Committee on the eve of his return to Germany after his American exile during World War II.

Wolska and lighting designer Alex Brok carve the stage fog with intrusive searchlights as Rehm's none-too-bright HUAC Chairman and Jeffrey Schwartz's dogged interrogator badger Brecht with accusatory "Are you now" questions. It gets even better with Martuscello and Adam Susman's sharp, high-handed performances in a raucous, carnival-costumed (by Connie Strayer) adaptation of "The Elephant Calf" kangaroo-court skit from "A Man's a Man."

The treatment of the songs improves too, starting with Telory Williamson's sardonic, Salome-like "Solomon Song" from "Threepenny." Dave Richardson, whose synthesizer accompaniment (with Ivor Holloway on sax) isn't always sure-handed, creates some stun-

ning ensemble arrangements, particularly of the "Benares Song" and "Oh, Heavenly Salvation" from "Mahagonny," and of the magnificent "Song in Praise of Learning" by Brecht and Hanns Eisler.

It's fitting, at least theoretically, for a Brecht tribute that the actors should be more effective as an ensemble than as individuals. It's even more fitting, though, that Truszczyński so vividly demonstrates the power of Brechtian acting principles in his performance. He never lets you forget that he's an actor playing the role, but when he comes to the emotional crux of an injustice, he invests the moment with searing power.

And he brings that combination to bear unforgettably on "What Keeps Mankind Alive" and the vindictive "Forgiveness Song" (both from "Threepenny"). Truszczyński's doesn't sound like a singer, and his vocal range is minuscule. But Brecht didn't write for trained voices, and Truszczyński sings the meaning with a vitality that proves Brecht's point. At the end, when he sings the opening of "Moritat" and drops the needle on that old recording — saying, simply, "Brecht sings Brecht" — this "Shark" has bite.

## THEATER REVIEW

### 'When the Shark Bites: A Brecht/Weill Cabaret'

► DIRECTOR Aleksandra Wolska

► CAST Jarek Truszczyński, Rush Rehm, Jeffrey Schwartz, Joya Martuscello, Telory Williamson, Adam Susman, John Wright, Fez Abramson, Brandon Singleton

► THEATER Stanford Summer Theater, Stanford, through Aug. 9 (650-725-ARTS)