



Telory Williamson, left, and Jarek Truszczyński (as Brecht) in "When the Shark Bites," produced by Stanford Summer Theater.

A moody, biting Brecht primer at Stanford

BY MARK DE LA VIÑA
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IN THE second act of "When the Shark Bites," the new cabaret piece by Stanford Summer Theater, actress Joya Martuscello offers the audience of this shape-shifting affair a dollop of advice.

"Whoever can't understand the plot, needn't fret," she says, directly addressing us. "It's incomprehensible."

But there was no collective "whew!" from those at the Little Theater in Stanford University's Memorial Hall.

Like the teasing yet telling remark, "When the Shark Bites" is a moody bouquet of Brechtian theatricality that adheres to the playwright/poet's profoundly influential views on 20th century performance. What that means is dumping the basic premise of representational theater like a brick, forsaking the idea that the audience should be convinced that what it sees on stage is happening.

The real teeth to "When the Shark Bites" are the scenes of Brecht (Polish National Theater alum Jarek Truszczyński) delivering testimony to the House Un-American Activities Committee. Truszczyński and director Aleksandra Wolska have drawn from the transcripts of Brecht's 1947 testimony, using the playwright's sly, cleverly oblique

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responses to accentuate not only his Marxist beliefs but his ideas about theater.

In a very un-Brechtian fashion, the performers suck us into the drama of the hearings, which often include Brecht explaining that his lyrics or poems were clumsily translated from the original German. A poem embraced by a communist group, such as "Forward and Never Forget," is suddenly transformed into a theatrical manifesto by a gaggle of banner-waving laborers. When the performers disappear, the scene shifts back to Brecht denying his communist ties to a pair of congressmen. But the congressional scenes are undermined by the cartoonish portrayals of the inquisitors, played by Rush Rehm and Jeffrey Schwartz.

"When the Shark Bites" works like a Brecht primer — which might give it additional weight when the production plays in October as part of the International Experimental Theatre Festival in Shanghai.

The show opens as a cabaret where actors Martuscello, John Wright, Telory Williamson, Fez

Abramson and Brandon Singleton take turns performing nightclub renditions of such Brecht/Kurt Weill collaborations as "Surabaya Johnny" from "Happy End" and "Pirate Jenny" from "The Three-penny Opera."

But the cabaret mood is shattered when Truszczyński, as a peeved Brecht, comes out of the audience and interrupts Adam Susman's performance of "Useless Song." He climbs onto the stage to proclaim, "I didn't mean that!"

Woven into "Shark" are macabre, dreamy sequences that jar or prod including the bizarre circus; and a performance of "Cannon Song" that features a pair of rifle-slashing soldiers who take their place in the auditorium to demand that the other actors perform for them.

When the Shark Bites

Developed by Jarek Truszczyński and Aleksandra Wolska, with songs by Bertolt Brecht, Kurt Weill and Hans Eisler

- **Producer:** Stanford Summer Theater
- **Where:** The Little Theater, Memorial Auditorium, Stanford University
- **When:** 8 p.m. Thursdays-Sundays
- **Through:** Aug. 9
- **Running time:** 2 hours, with one intermission
- **Tickets:** \$10-\$12; (650) 725-2787

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