



VERONIQUE VIAL

SEEKING GOODNESS: Charles Fathy, left, David Franco and Clement Von Franckenstein are deities who endow Clara Bellar in "The Good Soul of Szechwan" at the Electric Lodge in Venice.

THEATER REVIEW

Brecht's agitprop 'Good Soul' revives its challenge to hypocrisy

By DAVID C. NICHOLS
Special to The Times

"A good soul is not easily forgotten. There aren't many." Thus goes "The Good Soul of Szechwan" at the Electric Lodge in Venice. This sharp new take on Bertolt Brecht's didactic classic is idiomatic postmillennial theater of estrangement.

Brecht wrote "Der gute Mensch von Sezuan" in 1943, during his fertile exile from Hitler's Berlin. After an opening address from an artless child (Daisy O'Bryan, who alternates with Zola Jane and Sylvie Rae), a poetic agitprop parable transpires. Three deities (Charles Fathy, David Franco and Clement Von Franckenstein) inform water seller Wang (Albie Selznick) that they seek one good person amid pre-war China's masses. This paragon is title character Shen Te (the memorable Clara Bellar).

The heavenly trio grants the gold-hearted tart enough wealth to open a tobacco shop. Exorbitant rents from owner Mrs. Shin

(Sterling Fitzgerald) prohibit its solvency. Then there is Shen Te's concern for her neighbors, particularly an old carpet-selling pair (Steven Houska and Carmil Levite). Complications mount via a wealthy admirer (Herb Mendolsohn); a brutish aviator and his mother (Jay R. Ferguson and Cheryl Dooley); and Shen Te's mysterious male "cousin."

Under Gulu Monteiro's astute stewardship, the execution honors Brecht: anti-naturalistic, deliberately off-kilter, the spectator, all-important. Brecht evolved his Aristotelian concept from Vsevolod Meyerhold's theories; Jerzy Grotowski developed it further. Both are referenced here, as are commedia dell'arte and dozens of other styles.

The laconic translation is by Bellar in collaboration with the other actors and Monteiro, and its loping whimsy feels authentic. The designers exercise unobtrusive invention. Sarah Elgart's choreography is just enough; Renata's sleek costumes display wit without fanfare. Jorginho De Carvalho's lighting, Greg De

Belles' original music and the masks (created by their wearers under Isabelle Oliver's supervision) are remarkable.

So is the selfless ensemble centered by Bellar's translucent simplicity. These troupers embody Brecht's belief that art exists to challenge the hypocrisy that plagues civilization, and audiences exist to demand that artists do so. As this involving revival demonstrates, we must.

'The Good Soul of Szechwan'

Where: Electric Lodge Performance Space, 1416 Electric Ave., Venice

When: Thursdays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 7 p.m.

Ends: Feb. 15

Price: \$15-\$20

Info: (310) 306-1854, Ext. 3 or www.thegoodsoul.com

Running time: 2 hours, 5 minutes