

The Oregonian

Brecht turns 'sins' ironic side out

Liminal group's adaptation of "The Seven Deadly Sins" is sharply penetrating

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German playwright Bertolt Brecht envisioned a theater that would challenge audiences to look at the world with fresh eyes. Laying siege to what he says as bourgeois complacency, the Marxist and moralist wanted his audiences to confront perplexing social and ethical contradictions.

Such intentions motivated Brecht and composer Kurt Weill when they collaborated on the 1933 musical drama "The Seven Deadly Sins." Presented by Liminal Performance Group at the all-night dance club Panorama, this complex piece, subtitled a "Ballet Cantata," defies traditional genre categories. In it, opera, dance and 1930s-style cabaret jazz intermingle, and the result is a sardonically ironic play that turns popular morality on its head.

Translated under the title "The Seven Deadly Sins of the Petty Bourgeoisie," this one-act work follows the young woman Anna in her efforts to earn enough money to buy her struggling family a house on the Mississippi River. To this end, Anna travels to seven U.S. cities. In each, she tackles one of the seven deadly sins. Having triumphed over all "temptations" and accumulated a small fortune, Anna returns to her family at play's end.

The twist is that the "sins" she overcomes may not be sins at all but just the obstacles the "petty bourgeoisie" believes it must surmount to succeed in a world where money is the final measure. For instance, Pride turns out to be self-respect, and Wrath is merely moral outrage at mistreatment of the oppressed. To "make it" in a dollar-driven society, Anna cannot afford to yield to either these or the other five so-called "deadly sins."

The restraint Anna learns alienates her from her wholesome instincts, and Brecht divides her into two characters (a device he used in later plays). The brashly practical Anna sings Brecht's narrative lyrics while imposing an inverted sense of righteousness on the impulsive, creative alter-ego Anna, who dances and mimes the action through the play.

Liminal wonderfully captures the disturbing tone of this piece and, in Panorama, finds the perfect venue for it.

Director Bryan Markovitz presents the original German text (with projected subtitles) but translates its 1930s decadent sleaziness into a contemporary leather-and-bondage idiom. For instance, the wrath that Brecht's Anna feels when witnessing a Douglas Fairbanks-type star mistreat a trick horse here becomes rage when she views one porn star sadistically abusing another.

Lyndee Mah sings the role of the practical Anna with power, capturing the blend of abrasive raspiness and cool nonchalance the role requires. As the impulsive Anna, Georgia Luce physically depicts the character's evolution from blank-faced innocent victim to jaded cynic.

At the piano and as music director, Stephen Alexander does well by Weill, but director Markovitz deserves the highest praise for the stunning sharpness of vision he brings to the production. The 13 performers skillfully fill the acting space with vivid movement, and Markovitz integrates projections and video into the stage picture.