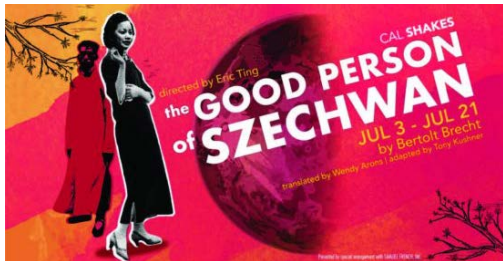


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'The Good Person of Szechwan' in Orinda

By *Sophie Braccini*

Photos provided

before giving up on the whole human race. In this pit of despair where cheating, lying or stealing is the norm for survival, the only good person is Shen Teh, the young prostitute who would rather love only one man, but needs to sell herself to survive. For one night, she gives up on her income to offer housing to the gods. To thank her, they give her a little purse of silver coins that allows her to buy a small business that should lift her from poverty.

No sooner that Shen Teh becomes a little better off than her poor surroundings, a flock of parasites descends on her to live off her generosity. She cannot say no; she is the good person. To save herself from this onslaught, she invents and personifies a male cousin of hers, Shui Ta, who is business savvy, kicks out the bloodsuckers, and regains some economic footing. Then love comes knocking on her door, sending her to other extremes of naivety and generosity.

All the elements of Brecht's view of the world are present in this play. The German playwright who wrote during the first half of the 20th century, exposed the difficult living conditions of the working class and its impact on human nature. His epic theater is written to bring social elements to the fore. Shen Teh is locked in a no-win scenario: she wants to be a well-doer, but people around her are so poor themselves that they scramble to take advantage of anything, including the one they have affectionately called the angel of the outskirts.

Shui Ta is Shen Teh's opposite, selfish and harsh. Interestingly enough, Shui Ta manages to create good for some, by being demanding rather than giving. Beyond the obvious weak-woman/ tough-man contrast created by the two personas, the play shows how people refuse to see anything else in Shen Teh than the simplistic image they have constructed of her. Having the courage to invent a new character for herself, to switch paradigms, lets her stretch her abilities, and interestingly it does so for others around her.

The audience will appreciate the complexity of human nature rendered with mastery by the excellent German playwright: no one is really good, no one is really bad. There is no message of hope at the end. Instead, the audience is asked to find the response for themselves: Is there a possibility to be good in the society we live in? Brecht's personal answer, at the time he lived, having fled Germany when Hitler rose to power, was that society had to be changed.

Kudos goes to the excellent actors of the play directed by Eric Ting, Cal Shakes' artistic director. They all present very convincingly their multifaceted characters. Francesca Fernandez McKensie is most impressive as Shen Teh/ Shui Ta, giving a nuanced and touching rendition of her character(s); Lance Gardner as Wang, the water seller is fun and energetic, adding an excellent humorous vibe; while Armando McClain as Yang Sun the unemployed pilot is alternatively seductive, terribly repulsive, and finally honest, all of it quite convincingly.

Cal Shakes' "The Good Person of Szechwan" runs through July 21 at the Bruns Amphitheater in Orinda. More information and tickets at www.calshakes.org.



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