

Art in America

19 March 2014
by Nate Cohan

Modernist Mom: My Barbarian at the Whitney Biennial

You could be forgiven your confusion over the presence of Bertolt Brecht's play *The Mother* in the current Whitney Biennial, a survey of contemporary American art. First staged in Berlin in early 1932, the hour-long piece is among the more elaborate of Brecht's *Lehrstücke* (learning-plays): explicitly didactic and aimed at the instruction of the working class rather than the catharsis of the bourgeoisie.

Which isn't to say, however, that it's particularly elaborate—even contemporary critics found Brecht's desperately earnest humanist Marxism outdated. *The Mother* occupies a strange middle ground between the warmup exercises of the shorter *Lehrstücke* and main-event crowd pleasers like *The Threepenny Opera* and *Mother Courage and Her Children*.

Fortunately for you, *My Barbarian*, invited by co-curator Anthony Elms, is sympathetic to that confusion. The New York- and Los Angeles-based performance collective (Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon and Alexandro Segade), which since 2000 has camped, queered and estranged the history of leftist politics and the institutionalization of their own practice, offers an appropriately Brechtian hijacking of Brecht himself. Their performance (through Mar. 23) takes place in a gallery adjacent to the museum's lobby, with a triangular stage jutting off one wall. The other walls feature papier-mâché masks and paintings blaring text from the play: "OUR COMRADE," "IN PRAISE OF COMMUNISM," "NOTHING WE DO DOES ANYTHING."

The first few of the play's numbered scenes (whose titles are projected as backdrops to the action) establish that we are in for the story of the politicization of Pelagea Vlassova, a Russian mother of and widow to factory workers. The artists take turns portraying her. Outfitted in beige overalls, they also don and circulate the masks to play the people Pelagea meets over the course of her transformation from doting, retiring hen to flag-waving socialist activist.



Then, in the first of a series of interruptions in which the artists speak more or less as themselves, Gordon holds a "press conference" in which she asks and answers her own questions, including "Why are we doing this?" She responds that the group was interested in the political potential of motherhood, specifically Brecht's conception of it.

At its best, Brecht's work makes fine dialectical distinctions between the positions of seeming or avowed allies, and Pelagea develops a penetrating critique of, among other vices, mothers' involvement in war efforts. Gordon also convincingly points to a "contentless" appropriation of the modernist tradition by contemporary art. *My Barbarian's The Mother* would reverse the trend of extracting from Modernism its formal self-reflexivity while abandoning the political commitments that motivated that form. In the second interruption, a "teach-in," Segade confesses a halting identification with the antagonistic character of the Teacher, an employer of Pelagea's whose preoccupation with "the universal" blinds him to the truth of dialectical materialism.

My Barbarian's performance is largely faithful to its source text, and the group's deviations are good-naturedly playful and frequently hilarious. At one point they exhort teachers in attendance to "cry uncontrollably" if their students are wealthier than themselves, to "laugh uneasily" if less wealthy. Audience participation is thoughtfully worked into the narrative throughout. An audience member acts out the heroic death of the revolutionary Smilgin, and the performance ends with a rousing sing-along of the original song "Get Up Mom (Working Mother)." The rest of the trio's changes consist of innocent queering: Pelagea's son Pavel and one of his murdered collaborators were boyfriends all along, and some of the dance slides into old-school voguing. The point, persuasively conveyed, is that in Brecht the critique is all over the place (and in a few instances readily reactivated), but the fun is where you find it.