Appeared in - The Australian

Drums in the Night
by Bertolt Brecht
Translated by Finegan Kruckemeyer

Brink Productions and
State Theatre Company of South Australia.
The Space, Adelaide Festival Centre.
5 April. Tickets $16.70 - $49.
Bookings BASS 131 246.
Until 16 April.

His works are so rarely performed these days that Bertolt Brecht is better known as an adjective than a playwright. Where would the theatre be without Brecht’s call to be rid of the futile illusion of naturalism? - still with a red curtain and the lighting rigs concealed, probably. He did so much to sharpen and re-define what it is to be theatrical that the word Brechtian is a commonplace. But somehow the plays themselves are seen as mere examples of a theory rather than the vibrant works they still are.

For this reason Brink Productions excellent new version of Drums in the Night is especially welcome. Translator Finegan Kruckemeyer has not only freshened the text, one of the playwright’s earliest, he has provided a zany preamble to the play’s turbulent setting in Germany in the early 1920s. The narrator, Babusch (David Mealor) gives us a quick history lesson back to Germany before the Wall, and before the war, wittily reminding us of the waves of political change that Brecht himself rode as a young poet, touched by idealism and an equally interesting opportunism.

Using a cabaret setting, director Chris Drummond, designer Gaelle Mellis and a fine cast give us essence of Weimar but with a convincingly contemporary style and a text that captures current vernacular without drowning in it. Brecht’s scathing satire of the beastly bourgeois is hilariously evident when Balicke the war profiteer (Michael Habib) sounds off at dinner to his wife (Jacqy Phillips) and son-in-law to be, Murk (William Allert) - the complacent exchanges rendered incomprehensible as they stuff their mouths with food. It is like a George Gross cartoon and as familiar as South Park.

But central to the success of the production are the performances by Rory Walker as Kragler, the soldier who inconveniently returns from the dead, and Ksenja Logos as his beloved Anna. Navigating the fine line between
farce and sentiment, the actors astutely demonstrate Brecht’s central para-
dox - that we can know that we are watching a fable, a construct, and be
touched by its meanings as well.

With Weill-like piano composition from the talented Quentin Grant, a
show stopper torch song from Michaela Cantwell and a grunge version of
The Ballad of the Dead Soldier from Cameron Goodall, Drums in the
Night is not only inviting to hear and delicious to watch, it shows that
with crisp direction, capable performers and more licence than the Brecht
estate usually agrees to, Bertolt can break the shackles and march to a dif-
ferent drum himself.