

## The Playgoer

# Brilliant Brechtian Conception

By Carl DeVato

There is no unanimity among theater people as to who is the most gifted playwright of this century. But the man whose name is cited more than any other is Bertolt Brecht. One of his best plays, "The Caucasian Chalk Circle," is beginning a successful run at the Caravan Theater in Cambridge. The Caravan group offers a production that is at once animating, entertaining, and relentlessly artistic.

A relatively young group, the Caravan Theater produces full-length works on selected evenings of the week. It operates within an old church on Massachusetts Avenue and has its own children's theater.

The signs indicate that here is a very alive and growing company, however small and unadvertised.

Using only 11 actors and a small playing area, the Caravan people present an incredibly pure version of the "Chalk Circle." The vibrancy of Brecht jumps from the stage and into the audience constantly. Making the most of vocal sound and body movement, this contemporary interpretation of a timeless piece achieves audience contact throughout the evening.

### Star Bright

The cast gives off a professional flow. Particularly fervent in their roles are David Baker, Bonnie Beatty, and Margaret Harrington. Grusha, the female lead, is

played by Maggie Helmer. She is constantly even in conveying her character. Whether pitying, defeated, outraged, or wily, the emotions of Grusha are firmly controlled by Miss Helmer.

David Starr Klein is the judicious Azdak. The most commanding of the performers, Klein ably captures the many faces of his strange and colorful personage. His smoothly pleasant voice adds to his gymnastic agility to make an excellent stage presence.

The set is simple and unusual precisely, one believes, as Brecht would want it. The visual facet is heightened by giant bright mannequins and a rolling printed backdrop. The inescapable chalk circle is nakedly at the feet of the first rows.

One doesn't have to understand alienation device and epic theater to like Brecht's plays. His style is so enchanting and musical that many think of his work as something magical. Casting off most of the conventions used by the nineteenth and early twentieth century dramatists, he sought a theater more simple and direct. To a great extent, this meant returning to ancient methods of song, rhyme and mask. It also meant inventing new forms and themes which would realistically exemplify our time. Never perceiving the theater as a means of escape, Brecht took as his aim the examination and uplifting of human society. The Marxism of his mature years makes clear to us the overriding concern with justice and survival which permeates all of his work.

### What Lies Underneath

We should never make the mistake of letting the hilarity and joy of his style eclipse the serious and severely critical aspect of Brecht's dramas. His fiery scorn for Nazism is directed at Capitalism as well. He sees man elementally at odds with the universe, and always the victim of immense and inhuman forces.

Azdak is the kind of hero Brecht can envision. A poor wretch from the beginning, he learns quickly that guile and resiliency are requisites for self-preservation. But beyond this, Azdak recognizes that to play judge is to bring about justice and productivity — even if putting on the honorable robes means risking the penalty for false representation. After all, "if you want justice, you have to pay for it."

When Brecht died in 1956, his work was altogether too little known by Americans, and rejected by Russians as being too formal and fancy. It is heartening to see him produced in all kinds of theater today — underground, off-Broadway, established, coffeehouse.

At the Caravan, both his vision and passion are transmitted directly and honestly. Innovative and rousing, this production just may be one of the best theatrical events of this season.



DAVID BAKER, JR. and Maggie Helmer in "Caucasian Chalk Circle" now at the Caravan Theater.