

CARAVAN THEATRE

1555 MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE • CAMBRIDGE, MASS. 02138

BRECHT

'Awesome
and successful'

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By DONALD CRAGIN

MT Drama Writer

Director Stan Edelson of the Caravan Theater has packed a lot of raw vitality and emotion into the theater's current production, Bertolt Brecht's "The Caucasian Chalk Circle." It is clear that more than one viewing is going to be required to get a complete and total picture.

Not that the production is muddled or unclear, just the opposite. It is played out by the young company of 11 fine actors and actresses with almost total clarity. It's just that so much happens on so many levels and ones attention is kept moving at such speed it seems things are being missed.

The play, written about 25 years ago and based vaguely on an old Chinese play, "The Circle of Chalk", concerns a ruling governor and his wife who abandon their city, and their child, during an uprising. The child is found by Grusha, a kitchen maid, who outwits iron-shirts (soldiers? police?), quislings, bandits, and the like to save and raise him. When the uprising is quelled, the mother has Grusha arrested as she decided she now wants her child.

The judge, a rascal called Adzak, and played to the nines by

Boston's off-Broadway

David Starr Klein, arbitrates the child's case in Solomon-like manner; he orders the child placed in a circle, and each woman to grasp an arm and pull. Whoever gets the child, keeps it. Of course it is Grusha who lets go, as her love can not allow the child to be maimed. But Adzak awards the child to Grusha, as justice, true justice, surfaces for the first time in the course of the play.

Edelson has combined a diorama, unspooled at stage rear as the action moves forward; huge puppets, grotesque symbols of the black souls of the governor, his wife, and a Wilde-sque visiting prince, and two additional puppets, two iron-shirts, who resemble brutal versions of the Tinman of Oz.

His cast, barefoot and basically dressed in black, change roles, with Klein earlier the governor, later the judge. What could sound confusing is not, in fact it is cinematographically clear as diorama unwinds, players move, puppets lurch, and the child, named Michael, and played by rag doll, is tossed about by fear and love.

Edelson has eliminated the

storyteller usually used to introduce the scenes, and substituted various members of the cast. He has his cast warm up with gymnastics prior to each act—and then take their positions, much as in an athletic event. He has staged a scathing scene of 'gun-loving' policemen which parallels William Burroughs' sense of death lust.

His company is virtually faultless in any of the characters they portray. Most notable are Klein, as mentioned, and who really deserves at least several paragraphs for his work, Maggie Helmer as Grusha and Allan Present, Grusha's lover, an actor who commands a stage without ever overwhelming his fellow players. Margaret Harrington is a superb bitch as the governor's wife, David Baker Jr. and Leonard Tamulonis are police horrors, and Harvey Cushing is an adroitly waspish prince.

Staged in the almost Elizabethan wing of the Harvard Epworth Methodist Church on Mass. Ave., the production of Brecht-Edelson's "Caucasian Chalk Circle" is an awesome and successful accomplishment.

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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 "Caucasion Chalk Circle" now at the Caravan Theater.



