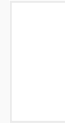




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The Theatregoer The Caucasian Chalk Circle

By [Jeffrey S. Golden](#), January 21, 1970

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at the Caravan Theatre (Harvard Epworth Church)

"WE DON'T do commercial crap around here," said Stan Edelson, director of the Caravan Theatre. We sat across from each other in his basement office before Friday night's performance of Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* as he talked about the formation of his semi-repertoire group. "We're interested in finding and performing the things that reach people," he told me in an almost inaudibly quiet voice. "It can be fucking or fighting or loving or hating: in that senses we're a political theatre."

Stan Edelson struck me as a very understated man. When he described his production in terms of the highest goals of most of the New Theatre (*Open*, *Free*, *Living*, or *Chocolate*), it had the effect of a Psychic Pep Talk. He had me up when I walked ✕ to the performing

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The company performed in a barren entry-hall that looked more like an undersized classroom than a theatre. Fold-up chairs on risers made a three-quarter round for the "stage" - a clearing in the middle of the room. At the base of the clearing, a ten-foot circle, which provided a focus for the actors' "movement" from scene to scene, was marked on the floor with chalk. The players were costumed in only the barest suggestion of peasant clothing, creating props with pantomime or interpretive embellishment of mundane objects. With these meager facilities, the Caravan players unraveled the most passionately brilliant production that I can remember seeing in the Boston area.

"We're interested in radical theatre, whether in form or content," Edelson had told me. His direction and the spontaneous creativity of his cast achieved the former, and the substance of Brecht's play guaranteed the latter. The story uses two major vignettes, tied together by a denouement that verges on theatre of the absurd, to depict the tortuous battles of a peasantry ravaged by imperial oppression and revolution.

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The first act revolves around the hellish odyssey of a peasant serving-girl, who roams the countryside with the abandoned baby son of the executed governor. She is never more than a few steps ahead of the Ironshirts, the brutal mercenaries ordered to find and murder the infant heir. In her search for a sanctuary where she can hide the boy and await the return of her lover from the imperial army, she meets with nothing but greed and hostility from the frightened peasants and rapacious lust from the soldiers. Her efforts to confront a culture of selfish barbarism with some compassion and decency only estrange her from her lover and mark her as a doomed woman in the eyes of the peasants. The act culminates in a surrealistic, semi-improvised dream sequence, where the characters, each physicalizing his own brand of hatred, converge on the girl from the edges of the chalk circle, suffocating her with their ugliness.

The second act is less powerful, largely because the portrait of peasant life becomes redundant. The clerk Azdak, Brecht's anti-hero- who survives on wit, predatory cunning, and cowardice when the occasion demands- becomes supreme judge^x of the land during the period of revolutionary chaos. He gleefully accepts bribes and doles out a whimsical

sometimes."). His "Golden Age was almost just," because the law of averages prevents his judgments from being as one-sided as those of the Imperial Courts.

THE SUBSTANCE of the show's success is the genius of its eleven actors (six of whom are permanent members of the company). Their assumption of several roles each produces a blended matrix of multiple relationships, making it difficult to think of them as anything but a collective unit. But a few words must be said- a grossly insufficient few- about individual performances.

Act One is a spectacular tour de force for Maggie Helmer as Grusha, the peasant girl. She floods the room with her subdued, determined strength, which generates into snarling anger when the provocation's mount up on her. She is charmingly ingenuous in one situation and rages like a mountain cat in the next. Her timing and spontaneity absorb us until we react in perfect parallel with her in each successive confrontation. She is the most sympathetic character I can recall.

Grusha's disasters are set against two compellingly tender love scenes with the soldier Simon Chachava (Allan Present). They electrify each other with a touch or a glance so that they seem to merge as an organic unit. They tease and caress each other to soften their anxious probing of one another's desires. When they feel sure of each other, the action is amplified into a frenzied embrace or a rowdy wrestling match. The improvisational use of exaggerated physical interaction between characters is stunningly appropriate throughout the play (in contrast to the uneven use of the same technique in the Loeb's recent *Three Sisters*), but never more so than in this scene. Present sensitively integrates the bawdiness of a peasant-soldier and the fresh poignancy of a boy in love for the first time, which on the face of it would seem impossible. He shows his versatility in the second act as a sniveling aspirant to the judgeship, the pathetic nephew of the Fat Prince (Harvey Cushing). Cushing comes across with a very funny performance in his own right as a Mikado-like royal butt-licker/petty intriguer.

David Starr Klein commands the second act as Azdak. He revels in the part, establishing a comfortable rapport with his audience from the very beginning. His complacent irony is the luxury of someone in on the Big Joke of our pretensions, so much so that he would threaten us if he weren't such a self-proclaimed slob. Even if he weren't backed by such solid supporting characters, Klein would make the second act worth ~~x~~⁺aying for, though he does have a tendency to get so wrapped up in Azdak that he jumps on his cue lines.

(preferably Grusha's, but any will do). The cruelty of the character, the very unfunny blood-lust of a hired killer, can easily be seen through the thin veil of caricature. Baker's talent, too, comes across in the contrast between his major role and one of his bit parts. As Grusha's hen-pecked brother Lavrenti, he offers a spiritual (at the least) eunuch as pathetic as any I've seen.

THE SUPPORTING players round out the organic unit of the group. They communicated the visceral meaning of a squalid poverty in their coarseness and their greed. The cast studied the peasant-figures of Breughel and Bosch when they first began to think about their characters during their own ten weeks of rehearsal, integrating their visual impressions with sensitivity exercises. The influence of the two artists can also be seen on the backdrop, which is essentially a giant scroll set on its side and rolled to different panels by the entering actors. Arnold Trachtman's black-and-white murals are intriguingly similar to the passionate, old-style revolutionary art of Mexico and eastern Europe.

The cast further developed their characters in rehearsal with simple animal personifications that came through in the performance. The only explicit animal metaphor used in performance was the satiric characterization of Aniko (Martha Crawford), Grusha's sister-in-law, as a shrilly blaring duck. But each actor implicitly reflected the sense of some non-human animal at one point or another. This was another device that the Three Sisters production also attempted, again with markedly less success.

This sense of bestiality accommodated one of the play's major themes very well. Brecht offers a contrast between the best and the worst in all of our natures. The predatory hideousness of the peasants, which upsets our romantic images of the harmony of rustic life, stands counterpoised to Grusha's courage and her magnificent love with Simon. Edelson emphasizes this dichotomy in his direction to a point that stretches credibility. The simplistic harshness of the contrast may be the production's only significant flaw.

The company's innovations are too numerous to adequately mention. The most striking was the use of towering, Daliesque scarecrow figures of different metallic colors to represent the cold insensitivity of the royal family and the Ironshirts. The corresponding actors set themselves in changing physical relationships with these horrifying puppets, wheeling them around the circle or chaining themselves to the giant ~~scarecrows~~ ^{scarecrows}. A bizarre raggedy-Ann doll represented Michael, the infant heir, emphasizing his impotence in the face of the cross-currents of intrigue.



sense of the word. If they do nothing with their time but prepare their shows, they can rightfully be called political people. They could not achieve the mixture of polished artistry and spontaneous expression that they do without passionately believing in their work.

At the end of the Chalk Circle performance, the company approaches the surrounding audience and, with different cadences, speak personal versions of Brecht's closing lines:

... That what there is shall go to those who are good for it,

Thus: the children to the motherly, that they prosper;

The carts to the good drivers, that they are well driven; And the valley to the waterers, that it bring forth fruit.

Maggie Helmer stood before me and substituted her own thought for the very last line: "And Vietnam to the Vietnamese people, to do with as they will." And somehow that tired slogan has never had more meaning for me.

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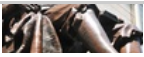
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