

Down in the valley

'Caucasian Chalk Circle' captures the spirit of Bertold Brecht's epic theater and entertains while asking deeper questions.

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WHY IS IT that while fat cats divvy up big defense contracts, average Joes are dying on the battlefield? What exactly makes a deserving parent?

These are some of the hot-button questions that German playwright Bertold Brecht poses in his 1944 work, "Caucasian Chalk Circle."

Today, Brecht's sentiments, voiced in Open Circle Theatre's ambitious production of his play, are as timely as ever.

A young company, Open Circle's mission is to integrate the work of artists with disabilities into its professional productions. With a cast of 15 actors performing nearly 100 parts, this "Chalk Circle" is played out in a combination of American Sign Language and English. Occasionally, it's noticeable that some actors are less dexterous than others at signing, but overall the dual-language performances are executed with admirable fluency and grace.

SET IN FICTIONAL Grusinia (Soviet Georgia) at the end of World War II, the action starts when two groups of peasants argue about the future of their battered valley. Should they return to the old customs or go modern? The factions come to an agreement and celebrate with entertainment.

Brecht's play within a play begins here when a gypsy-styled storyteller (Eva Salvetti) regales the audience with an old tale of war and strife. Her band of players and the assembled peasants assist by acting out the multiple roles found in her two-pronged parable.

On an Easter Sunday long ago, the revolution begins. The feared "Ironshirts" are coming and Grusha (Suzanne Richard) is surprised to find that her aristocratic mistress has fled town leaving her infant son behind. Despite the danger involved, the unmarried servant girl takes charge of the royal baby, opening herself to untold peril and inconvenience.

The long first act moves along briskly. Grusha's picaresque escape is exciting, and Richard's performance is captivating. Her Grusha is open and alive, eager to do the right thing.

After intermission, the storyteller shifts gears. On a whim, the governing soldiers make Azdak, a wily drunkard, into an important judge. Not surprisingly, scenes of mercenarily dispensed cockeyed justice ensue.

Eventually, Grusha comes before the judge. Her former mistress has resurfaced and wants the baby back. In an unusual moment of lucidity, Azdak makes a wise decision (here Brecht borrows heavily from the Bible's King Solomon story and ancient Chinese lore), and saves the day.

In spite of Scott McKenzie's energetic, inventively funny performance, the second half of the show drags. But for the most part, co-directors Monique Holt and Grady Weatherford have managed to harness a play that is more than three hours long, and endow the production with a light sense of humor and moments of emotional depth.

They've captured the spirit of Brecht's epic theater — entertaining while asking the deeper questions — with few surprises. All the elements are there: music, broad portrayals, and direct address.

For this production, Open Circle is using Roundhouse Silver Spring's large, chilly (bring a sweater) black box theater.

Brecht encouraged audiences to watch and listen, but think for themselves. Open Circle's "Caucasian Chalk Circle" makes it happen.

-Patrick Folliard