

## **Circular Logic**

Open Circle Theatre adds fresh artistic layers to Brecht's bittersweet parable

by Jolene Munch

Published on 07/14/2005

On paper, Bertolt Brecht's plays don't always settle well. Generally his works read like a gravelly stew simmered with tough hunks of meat and not enough broth, and it's up to the reader to digest his intimate political philosophy and elegant prose, imagining the greater moral implications and testing his universal theories on war and peace. When his pages are transported to the stage, it's an even heavier challenge for artists and audiences alike to retain all of the rich ingredients in Brecht's hearty stew.

Whatever the challenges are in producing Brecht, they haven't stopped Open Circle Theatre from presenting his epic *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, a bittersweet parable centered around the love between a servant and a soldier and a mother and her son. With an energetic cast of 16, Open Circle Theatre carries the meaning of "diversity" to new heights, featuring actors and designers with and without disabilities, of various ages and ethnicities.

It's a difficult beast of a play to work through, and co-directors Monique Holt and Grady Weatherford employ the use of American Sign Language to add further depth and weight to the already bloated saga. The mordant irony of Brecht is delivered by a melodramatic pageant of slow and surreal scenes that are often interrupted by intense visual language and offbeat songs composed by Fahir Atakoglu, whose steamy score of exotic melodies are tempered by Arabian and other Eastern influences.

"Terrible is the seductive power of goodness," the Story Teller portends, and with this Grusha Vashnadze is swayed by her inherent conscience to flee Persia with a royal baby boy in her arms, saving the abandoned infant from certain death. She has promised to marry a local soldier, but she also vows to care for the young child, rearing him as her own flesh and blood. Years later when the birth mother decides to claim her only son, an unscrupulous judge draws a circle of chalk, demanding that each mother attempt to pull the boy from the inner circle.

The heart of Brecht's drama doesn't reside in either the first or second act, but is torn between two valuable bookends of the play, concerning a dilemma in a small village in Caucasus. Eva Salvetti offers a grand performance as the mistress of ceremonies who cleverly weaves the tales together, and she is served well by Melanie Clark's bright, inspired costumes and lush lighting from Marianne Meadows.

The mother's love story is ultimately told through Suzanne Richard, who has the ability to elicit strong emotional responses with her

honest interpretations of character and motive. Her Grusha is an optimistic peasant tinged with the kind of sadness that comes from growing weary with the burden of hope. The second act marks the welcome return of Scot McKenzie to the local stage as Azdak, the "drunken onion" judge. Despite expert acting from McKenzie, his story is quickly lost in a confusing series of mock court trials and manic passages scattered around the stage.

Caucasian Chalk Circle is certainly no easy feat to mount, but Open Circle Theatre has dared to add fresh artistic layers to its allegory, creating a strong and muscular rendering of Brecht's post-war parable.