

Troupe Integrates Disabled Performers Into the Act

By Michael Toscano
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Open Circle Theatre has come a long way in a short time. The company, which is the area's first professional theater enterprise to integrate artists with disabilities as part of its core mission, staged its first show in a downtown DC cafe just two summers ago.

More recently, the company's home was a crumbling, leaky warehouse in an industrial area near Crystal City. But several top Helen Hayes Award nominations this spring for its distinctive and creatively updated version of "Jesus Christ Superstar" gave Open Circle artistic recognition on a level with some of the area's most prestigious theaters. Now, the unique troupe has a temporary new home in Silver Spring and, perhaps, a new level of acceptance from the theater community and the public.

The group is staging Bertolt Brecht's scathing satire "The Caucasian Chalk Circle" at Round House Theatre Silver Spring. It's an ambitious undertaking, with a three-hour running time and more than 90 roles performed by a cast of 16, some with various disabilities, others without. Directed by Silver Spring's Grady Weatherford and the District's Monique Holt, who is deaf, the production combines humor with Brecht's pointed observations on war, property, selfishness and authority.

Set in the Caucasus Mountains of what is now the Republic of Georgia after World War II, the tale focuses on two groups of peasants warring over a valley. One faction wants a traditional, old-fashioned life while the other favors modern advances in agriculture and industry in a fable that attacks injustice and social inequality.

In a play-within-the-play that constitutes most of the presentation, a folk tale that can be traced to ancient China is enacted. It's the story of a housemaid named Grusha (Suzanne Richard) who rescues the infant son of a murdered governor when his family flees insurgents. Years later, a judge must decide whether Grusha will keep the child or return him to the mother (Maggie Glauber) who carelessly abandoned him. Both the struggle over the land and the fight over the child force the audience to choose sides, as Brecht challenges conventional views of how society should be ordered.

Some hearing-impaired actors use American Sign Language to communicate, with speaking actors occasionally delivering simultaneous orations for them. Other actors have worked with the directors to create original gesture-based forms of expression, which Holt, who was born in South Korea, explained through

interpreter Tim Chamberlain.

"The original language of people was gesture," she said. "Visual communication is an important part of language. As deaf people, we depend almost 75 percent on that. In the same way, we're using gestures onstage."

The result is a performance style that integrates artists with disabilities into the production without overtly pointing to their differing styles. This enhances rather than detracts from the play's message, occasionally adding a dramatic edge that might not otherwise exist.

Holt and Weatherford say they each worked equally with hearing and hearing-impaired actors, which Weatherford described as a "learning experience" for him. "I think MoMo [Holt] really developed the physical style of the performances, while I concentrated on interpreting Brecht, who often has characters saying one thing while meaning something quite the opposite," Weatherford said. All performances are audio described for blind or low-vision patrons.

The play represents a significant challenge for Richard, Open Circle's artistic director and one of the group's star performers. The 34-year-old Rockville resident has been acting in professional productions since age 12 and has not let osteogenesis imperfecta, a genetic disorder characterized by bones that break easily, impede her.

Most recently, she played in the Washington Shakespeare Company's production of Tennessee Williams's "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore" in a role where her disability was irrelevant. Standing four feet tall, she generally moves with the aid of crutches or a wheelchair. In this production, though, she abandons her crutches and climbs over the backs of actors representing the mountains, carrying a makeshift "baby" and singing all the while.

"Rehearsing it was more draining than actually doing it," Richard said. "Once we get it up and running, it's just a train going along and you can see the beginning and the end of what you're going to have to do, so it's not as exhausting."

Staging a play with a heavy political message, even one that includes a fair amount of humor both broad and subtle, is risky for the troupe. Audience response may determine whether the high-profile Round House facility becomes the regular venue for the company.

"We're hoping to make this our permanent home," Richard said. "But a lot will depend on the reaction of the community and the feedback Round House gets."

"The Caucasian Chalk Circle" continues through July 24, performed by Open Circle Theatre at Round House Theatre Silver Spring, 8641

Colesville Road, next to the AFI/Silver Theatre. Showtime is 8 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday; with a 2 p.m. matinee Saturday and Sunday; and a 7 p.m. performance Sunday, July 17 only. To purchase tickets, call 800-494-8497 or visit <http://www.boxofficetickets.com>. For reservations, call 240-683-8934. For information, including questions regarding accessibility,