

Caucasian Chalk Circle

When you hear that an autocrat plans to "tear down these wretched slums...to make way for a garden" in Bertolt Brecht's 1944 play, you begin to wonder if we'll ever get this humanity thing right. The brutality, the cynicism, the corruption, and the self-dealing that Brecht is so endlessly, depressingly fond of showcasing are very much on view in the Open Circle Theatre's production of the Solomonic legend of the washerwoman Grusha and her stolen baby. Fortunately, so are the surprising goodness and sensibility that can make this particular play such a startlingly sweet dispatch from the Brechtian jungle. Open Circle treats it less as a communist allegory (and it is) or a cautionary fable about the yawning American class chasm (and it certainly could be) than as an excuse for deepening the integrationist explorations that are the company's mission. The overriding notion Brecht's selling in the Solomonic legend of the washerwoman Grusha and her stolen baby is that we ought to be asking who can do the best work with the available resources; remember that, and it makes a certain sense that Open Circle comes at the play with an inventive fusion of sign language, spoken dialogue, singing, and dance, with a healthy mix of actors who can fling themselves headlong into a wheelbarrow and others who need to stash their crutches somewhere before they can flee pursuing soldiers across a bridge thrown up by castmates' backs. As in any experiment, some leaps land more confidently than others, but Open Circle scales the sharp-peaked mountain of a play with no little panache.

(TG)