



07/02/2009

## ‘Caucasian Chalk Circle’ creative, crisp and compelling

by Willow Belden , qboro Editor

Tickets to Performance Lab 115’s production of “Caucasian Chalk Circle” are only \$15, but the show would be worth seeing at five times that price. The cast is stellar, the scenery and costumes strikingly inventive and the performance has a level of energy to which all plays should aspire.

Bertolt Brecht’s piece is written as a play within a play, and in this production the prologue establishing the frame story, happens not on stage but in the austere basement of the theater. Actors and audience members cluster together, blurring the lines between performers and spectators and drawing viewers into the action.

The frame story ends — and the show moves on stage — as a singer, accompanied by a banjo, narrates the tale of a peasant girl named Grusha, who rescues an abandoned baby after the child’s father, the governor, is beheaded and the mother flees town. Grusha reluctantly takes the baby as her own, grows to love him and turns her life upside down for him, making sacrifice after sacrifice with graceful resignation, only to be confronted by the boy’s biological mother, who eventually returns to claim her son.

The first few minutes of the show may confuse those who are unfamiliar with Brecht’s story, as the pace is dizzyingly fast, the acting stylized and the expository events chaotic. But don’t lose heart; the story unfolds with clarity — and there’s not a dull moment in the piece.

There’s also not a weak link in the cast. Rachel Jablin plays Grusha with subtlety, poise and charm. She captures the character’s emotional journey beautifully, with the giddy optimism of girlish love giving way to a willful determination to persevere after she is saddled with the burden of a child. Her patient acceptance of the brutal circumstances she faces and her unswerving willingness to make painful personal decisions for the good of her young charge make for heart-wrenching moments later in the play.

Each of the other actors plays a variety of characters, and the ensemble casting works excellently. Of particular note are Rachel Schwartz, who paints a scathing picture of the vain, whiny governor’s wife, without falling prey to corniness; and Marty Keiser, who brings an admirable level of energy — and comic relief — to the show with his portrayal of Azdak, the judge.

The production’s visuals and sound are also strikingly effective. Peter Ksander’s set is reminiscent of a building under construction, with bare studs, construction barriers and an empty elevator shaft which is used with exceptional dramatic effect.

Asta Hostetter’s costumes are the unlikeliest mixture of items, almost all of which could have come from the nearest thrift store — but they accentuate the characters’ personalities perfectly and update the story with creativity and color.

The show’s sound follows suit, with excellent singing set to an original folksy score. Other audio effects, created by a host of random objects (think “Stomp”), add to the show’s intensity and accentuate the mood of individual scenes.

The theater may be small and the show’s budget smaller, but this rendering of “Caucasian Chalk Circle” is fresh, vibrant and compelling — and shouldn’t be missed.



Grusha determines to take the governor’s abandoned baby with her. (photo by Yi Zhao)