

Intrigue surrounds “Chalk Circle”

Palo Alto Daily News

Friday, August 11, 2006

Is half a baby better than no baby at all? That unnerving question is at the heart of Bertolt Brecht’s astonishingly powerful 1944 play “The Caucasian Chalk Circle,” currently running at the Dragon Theatre in downtown Palo Alto.

As our planet ramps up for World War III, and everyone fights for their very own half-baby, “The Caucasian Chalk Circle” becomes a very important play for modern audiences.

In “Caucasian Chalk Circle,” written in 1944 near the end of World War II, two neighboring agricultural collectives disagree over the use of some disputed land. Theirs is a world in which the grim political choice is between Hitler and Stalin. Pick your poison.

Play within a play

So the collective members decide to take a time-out by watching a play. Most of “Caucasian Chalk Circle,” then, is the performance of a play within a play.

Brecht’s script is a beautiful piece of epic storytelling – one of the most powerful works of the modern theater. It offers profound insights about the human struggle to survive with self-respect and self-determination in a corrupt and violent world.

Inside the story of “Chalk Circle’s” play within a play, political intrigue in Asian Georgia leads to a coup among factions of the ruling oligarchy. In the ensuing chaos, a peasant woman rescues a neglected infant and raises it as her own, battling extraordinary difficulties as a single mother.

The mother’s touching and beautiful long-distance romance with a soldier called to fight in the distant wards is in powerful contrast to her frightening local story of political anarchy and danger.

“Chalk Circle” does, however, end happily because, as one character remarks, “In the bloody times, there are still good people.” Strangely, justice comes from a drunken judge in soiled underwear. Life is filled with paradox.

Ultimate parental question

“Caucasian Chalk Circle” is a fascinating play with big themes. It asks the question, “What qualifies one to be a parent?” Is the parent someone who could tear a child in half in order to own some of the child, or is the parent someone who could relinquish the child from her life in order to save it?

This philosophical question about parenting runs deeper than the immediate family story, addressing larger parallel issues of the conflict between material and nonmaterial values

in the human world, and the nature of leadership and authority. The wonderful metaphor of a play-within-a-play acknowledges the magical healing power of poetry and theater.

Director Ana-Catrina Buchser has staged an emotional Palo Alto production. It took a while to launch on opening night, but soon found its flow.

Ensemble effort

Fifteen community actors multiple-cast in more than 75 roles create an ensemble feel that illustrates Brecht's key theme about the interrelatedness of human beings. Arcadia Conrad is affecting as Grusha, the helpless child turned into the helpless mother of a neglected infant.

Heidi Kobara anchors the production as a folksinger-narrator, with effective original Georgian-flavored folk and military music composed by director Buchser.

"The Caucasian Chalk Circle" is theatre for thinking people. As our planets hurtles toward World War III and everyone fights for his or her own half-baby, this is an opportunity to stop and rethink our values.

Rating – 3 stars

John Angell Grant