

# ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

## Otterbein's staging of Brecht play runs long, but succeeds by drawing in the audience

By DENNIS THOMPSON

Suburban News Theater Critic

Otterbein College Theatre holds our interest in an overly long classic, despite nearly trying too hard.

One doesn't often see Bertolt Brecht works performed, and that alone, along with Otterbein Theatre's history of quality, may be enough reason to check out their current production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

Written near the end of World War II, this is the German playwright's retelling of the tale of King Solomon and a child claimed by two mothers.

A term associated with the theater of Brecht is *alienation*. It was his intent to distance the audience from what was being seen, to make them aware they were watching a play, to not become so emotionally involved with the characters that they would not attend to the ideas being presented.

His work is also referred to as "epic theater" in that rather than focusing on a few characters in a tightly constructed story, he is more concerned with his narrative showing a larger, societal view.

This most hits home with us here in his statements on war and the uncanny parallels with today.

However, what is ironic is that this play is at its most appealing when the focus is on one woman's story.

In the first act, the servant Grusha rescues an infant left behind during a revolution by a fleeing noblewoman, and raises him as her own against great odds. The second act shows us the life of the irreverent judge Azdak, leading us to the convergence of the trial when the original mother and Grusha come before him.

The setting is barren. Rob Johnson's design utilizes moving stairs and platforms, filling an open stage and showing a bare back wall.

The tale is told through narration and song

with Dennis Davenport's original music and a seven-piece orchestra accompanying the cast.

And a strong cast it is. Each member, with the exception of Kari Ringer as Grusha, plays multiple roles, many covering half a dozen significant parts with great differentiation.

Chief among these are Cory Smith as Brecht, Governor, and Azdak; with Elizabeth Shivener as the translator Eric Bentley, the narrative singer, and Azdak's sidekick, Shauwa.

Also strong are Emily Asbury in roles including the Governor's wife, Steve Czarnecki as a hated soldier, Caitlin Morris as a peasant mother-in-law, and Leon Axt as Simon Shashava, Grusha's love.

Based on the order of the curtain call, the production considers the roles played by Smith and Shivener to be those of the stars. No quibbles with these performances, as they are prevalent throughout, particularly Smith, who shows great range.

However, it's Ringer's heart-rendering portrayal of Grusha that stands out and makes us care. It's because of this that we wonder what Brecht had in mind.

He may want us not to care about an individual, to be more concerned about his view of the larger society. However, he gives us here a character that is so poignant, and because it is played so well, we care about her more than what's happening around her.

The beginning of the second act, where Brecht gets away from Grusha and tells us about Azdak, comes off as more a statement on the political. However, it's also a point at which our interest begins to fade, only to come back when Grusha appears for the trial.

Director Christina Kirk attempts to help connect this material to her audience by inserting Brecht and Bentley as characters, adding scenes with them stepping back and commenting. This is interesting at first, but

she goes to the well too often.

We eventually are keenly aware that the squabbling between playwright and translator is interrupting the action and delaying us in getting to the end of this three-hour piece.

There is also a forced sing-along that, instead of engaging us, makes us uncomfortable.

Still, Kirk has mounted a grand production, with characters we care about (whether Brecht likes it or not). There are many large and small moments that add to our involvement.

The varied pictures on large background screens are visually striking. Even a short moment, like the sound of Grusha crossing a rickety bridge, draws us in.

What I feared might seem like an evening in a theater history class is actually quite enjoyable and moving. It is long, though, and begins to feel it after intermission.

We come away more moved by the personal story than its overriding societal statements.

While that may not have been Brecht's intent, it makes this worth watching.

Otterbein College Theatre's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* continues at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 7, through Saturday, Feb. 9, in the Fritsche Theatre of Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville. Tickets are \$15. For more information, call 614-823-1109.



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