

"The Caucasian Chalk Circle" to be presented by John Muir Theatre Ensemble

March 6, 1978

Bertolt Brecht's "The Caucasian Chalk Circle" will be presented by the John Muir Theatre Ensemble at 8 p.m. Wednesday, March 15, through Friday, March 17, and at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturday, March 18, in room 2250, Humanities and Social Sciences Bldg., Muir campus, at the University of California, San Diego.

The play, written in California at the time that World War II was drawing to a close, tells a tale of property, possessiveness and the abuses committed in the name of blood ties and "natural" right. The "chalk circle" in the title refers to a Chinese parable in which the possession of a child in dispute was decided by a Solomonic magistrate in China in the year 1009 A.D.

Though the emotion-laden scene wherein the peasant woman Grusha and the Governor's wife struggle to keep the child would be the climax of what Brecht considered "bourgeois" theater, in this play the conflict is a peg for the playwright's efforts to make the audience think about the human situations he is presenting.

According to the play's director, Eric Christmas, "Brecht considered himself non-theatrical. His intent is to stop his audience before they get too emotionally involved, to force them to be objective enough to think about what they're seeing.

"He doesn't succeed totally," admits Christmas. "At moments he is very theatrical, very emotional. He moves from naturalism to a highly stylized, presentational theater. One moment, the peasant girl Grusha is talking to her lover and the next, to the audience."

"The Caucasian Chalk Circle" is being performed in ensemble style. There are over 100 roles in the play but only 16 actors, 14 of them taking an average of 9 roles apiece.

Christmas notes that Brecht wrote many of his plays for the Berliner Ensemble, a theater system in which there were no stars.

"If you think of European theaters," says Christmas, "you think of the Old Vic, The Comedie Francaise, the Berliner Ensemble, where there is an emphasis on the company, the peer group, the opportunity for a breadth of experience. Psychologically, there's an enormous difference between that and the United States where you talk about 'Barbra Streisand starring in such-and-such.'"

Christmas emphasizes the "very, very lean" nature of the production which, like other John Muir Theatre presentations, spurns the "seduction of the audience with lighting, scenic pieces, props and costumes." The real stars, says Christmas, are the play itself and the "work in unison" of the theater company.

"The Caucasian Chalk Circle" is the second presentation of the John Muir Theatre Ensemble which was funded by a UC San Diego Instructional Improvement Grant. The grant not only supports the productions of the ensemble group but made possible the refurbishing of the lecture hall where the plays are presented to enable it to double a few days each quarter as a public theater.

The members of the ensemble with their director are totally responsible for all aspects of each production, designing and building all set pieces and properties and designing and operating the lighting and sound systems. A limit of \$250 has been set for all expenses for each production. A new company is auditioned and chosen for each play.

During the fall quarter, a new production of "The Bacchae" was presented and at the end of the spring quarter, the musical comedy "Guys and Dolls" will be staged.

The three plays are serving as models for three drama courses in which students are examining and discussing epic theater, tragedy and comedy, in part by observing rehearsals of each play and reviewing and evaluating the work of the ensemble.

Tickets for each performance are 99 cents at the door on the evenings of performance.

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