

at a train wreck, the show turns dark, religious and Strindberg-nightmarish. You're not going to follow it all willingly, or even comprehendingly. But you're going to be thinking and arguing about this show for a long time.

The Caucasian Chalk Circle

By Bertolt Brecht. Presented by the Educational Center for the Arts. Jan. 31 through Feb. 2 at the Little Theater, 1 Lincoln St., New Haven. (203) 777-5451, aces.k12.ct.us/schools/eca/index.aspx.

When I heard that the ECA—that New Haven arts magnet high school which, in tone and talent, acts like it's a college theater department—was readying a production of Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, I ran round there to bitch about old Bertolt with them.

Directed by ECA instructor Joan McAfee, the students are attempting to utilize classic Brechtian alienation technique and the broad gestural acting associated with the political theater firebrand—even though they may not be entirely convinced of its effectiveness. "The alienation effect doesn't seem like theater to me," one of the students argued. "The whole master gesture thing—I'm afraid I'll be that one bad actor that gets it really wrong." A classmate agreed: "We have to play a *type* instead of playing a *character*. We're into Stanislavsky-based technique! When you have to change to epic theater..."

"My problem," another offered, "is what impact was he trying to make? And can we make that same impact today?"

Hard to answer, but at least they're working with what is perhaps Brecht's most American play, written while he was employed by Hollywood movie studios and being grilled by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee. It was prepared with a movie star in mind for the lead role—a woman who goes to court to gain custody of a child, one of several interwoven plots about who's entitled to control or judge the rights and property of others. The play's flush with political metaphor, but the ECA actors also dig Brecht's sentimentality. And they glimpse a Marx Brothers madness alongside the painful familial emotions. Maybe they can't *connect* the way Stanislavsky would want them to, but many of them are enjoying the chance to stretch, act out, stick out their chests and strut.

They've devoted months of solid classroom concentration to the play and its accompanying acting

crazy:

Peer Gynt

Feb. 4-9 at Yale's New Theater, 1156 Chapel St., New Haven. (203) 432-1234, yale.edu/drama/peergynt.

Mike Donahue's the guy who brought the techno-charged *Electronic City* and Ibsen's *Brand*, rebranded, to the Yale Cabaret. He also co-ran the 2007 Summer Cabaret at Yale series—and, he reveals, has just been chosen to run the 2008 season as well, starting in June with *The Who's Tommy*. Right now, he's back in Ibsen mode, for his graduate thesis project, *Peer Gynt*. The Yale School of Drama knows the play well—it was a thesis project for director Jean Randich in the early '90s (starring Paul Giamatti!) and has been done in student workshops not open to the public, and the script's regularly analyzed in Yale classrooms. As *Peer*, whose journey through lands both enchanted and realistic focuses its epic social statement, Donahue's cast the guy who starred in his mesmerizing adaptation of *The Bacchae* for the Yale Summer Cabaret, Barrett O'Brien.

The play's scenes are often played as disjointed, dreamlike and separate, but Donahue's version makes sure that "pieces of his life accumulate through the space" and anchor the odyssey. Still, there is no lack of change—"74 full looks," he says, were required from costume designer Moria Clinton. There's both recorded and live music, including ukulele, washboard bass and something that's supposed to be an Arabian lute but isn't. "All of Act 4 is aggressively inappropriate in its take on Arabic culture," Donahue promises.

For those who know what a mammoth event *Peer Gynt* can be, this will be a relatively brisk one, running under three hours (in some hands, it can go for six or seven), though Donahue's hacked away no full acts and only a few characters. He's working from the Rolf Fjelde translation because it changes its meter and pacing just like Ibsen's original.

The audience will set off in little pockets of seats around the New Theater space as the action unfolds all around them. "I'm very interested in simultaneous lives," Donahue says. "I'm interested in people *being* with *Peer* on his journey rather than just *watching* *Peer* on his journey." Mostly, he's mindful of advice given him by Anna Shapiro, who directed *The Unmentionables* at Yale Rep last year: "You're in big trouble if it's not fun to watch this play." To that end, trolls fly. ●

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