

Meadowbrook Theatre Shines in 'Chalk Circle'

Stan Ovshinsky

1967

Saturday night, January 14, at the Meadow Brook Theater was a Brechtian evening in more ways than one. A youthfully middle-aged audience, whose appearance and intermission conversation would have been classified by Brecht as bourgeois, reacted enthusiastically to a first-rate production of his 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle.' Despite the fact that it was an opening play for a new company, it was in some respects better than the production by the Lincoln Center Repertory Theater in New York last year.

It is obvious that Detroit is experiencing a flowering of the theatrical arts that ranges from the young, vibrant productions of the Court Players through the soon to be institutionalized Meadow Brook Theater. The Brechtian irony is that the John Fernald Company as a continuing organization has been made possible by the status advertisements and publicity appealing to the society columns. So be it. As long as it provides the kind of excellence indicated in its first production.

But will it? There were few young people in the audience and while the cast was commendably integrated, the audience was not. If this theatrical revolution is to have real meaning, it should be taken-out of the cocktail party amusement category and be made a stimulating agent for broadening the appeal of theater to larger groups of the population.

To do this, it is suggested that the sponsoring University have the artists visit the schools of Detroit, putting on scenes and discussing the plays, have special evenings at no cost or at reduced prices, encourage theater parties from public school groups, spend some of their bountiful advertising budget with college papers and generally try to utilize this opportunity to qualitatively change the cultural climate in the Detroit area. At least one good thing came from the snob-appeal fanfare — a substantial group of suburbanites were exposed to a worthwhile play produced to the highest of standards.

One of the best things to be said of 'Chalk Circle' is that not only were the leads good, but the supporting cast showed acting professionalism that bodes well for further productions. For the most part, the actors changed their parts without disturbing mannerisms. Eric Berry, as Azdak the Judge, had the juiciest role and a difficult one in that it could have been played so broadly as to lose its significance. He was superb. Angela Wood, as the Governor's wife, and Robert Donley as the Fat Prince, handled their roles just right. Lorna Lewis as Grusha, was a trifle artificial — it might not have been her fault but the play's. The scenery, costumes and makeup were simple and well done. It was interesting to contrast them with the dramatic and very effective use of masks and elaborate robes in the New York production.

The direction was disciplined and there is no question that Fernald understands Brecht. He did well to delete the author's embarrassing Stalinist prologue. In it, the happy, comradely peasants from two different collective farms listen to the sweet reason of the play as told by the storyteller and resolve their competitive difficulties. Brecht is a great intellectual puzzle for he cynically saw through hypocrisy, and could affirm human solidarity without mawkishness.

This season Fernald will also produce Shakespeare, Shaw, Anouilh and Chekhov. It is hoped that if he is going to stick to the classics, he'll give us some that are not seen often in Detroit—Ibsen or O'Neill, for example. He should

be commended for not utilizing the star system that was the drawing card of the Ypsilanti Greek Theater. A hope would be that somehow the student drama group of Oakland University, which in the past has shown some real talent for the theater, could be benefited by the presence of the Fernald Company rather than slighted.

Let us hope that Fernald can reach out and bring into the chalk circle of Meadow Brook all of the people of Detroit who should and must be involved in the exaltation of the intellect and the emotions that the best of theater offers.



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