Dramashop's Chalk Circle brilliant Brecht

The Caucasian Chalk Circle, by Bertolt Brecht, presented by MIT Dramashop. Directed by Robert Sculien, sets by William Fregoe, lighting and staging by Edward Darnia, costumes by Margaret Hall.

Brecht is well known for having infused his works with cynical anarchism. This man, who based his views on contemporary political world and simultaneously so disillusioned with the superficial, bourgeoise society in Europe which came crashing down after WW II, turned to writing both drama and poetry to express his views. For Brecht, literature is a vehicle for expressing his dilemma of living in an isolated, violent world where justice is not possible and for delineating his Marxist view of society.

The play begins in Grusinia (Georgia, USSR) during the summer of 1945. After WW II, two neighboring villages must decide which of them will get to use a valley which before the war belonged to only one of them. The peasants of the village haggle briefly, each proposing uses for it. Finally the commissioner announces that Arkadi the storyteller (played by Erin Fause '83) will recount a parable to help them solve their dilemma. This parable derives from the Chinese pise, the Chalk Circle, written about 1300 A.D. Brecht, a man dedicated to the Marxist discipline and to whom the struggle of the masses was unimportant, modernizes this parable by setting it in Georgian USSR, the birthplace of Lenin.

The drama follows an epic narrative wherein the storyteller, Arkadi, narrates five scenes performed by the peasants. The narratives were greatly enhanced by Margaret Hall's superb costumes, which included elaborate gowns and elevated wooden shoes for the noble ones, and simple clothes for the servants and peasants. These costumes served to heighten the artificial differences between the classes. The aristocrats also wore masks (by Sue Dowling-Bryant '81 and Kevin O'Connell '83) to further enhance their inhumanity. These instruments also served another purpose: They helped the audience to see that what was happening on stage was to be observed from a distance. According to Brecht, the audience was not to identify with the characters, but was to watch with critical detachment.

A curtain did not close between scenes to hide the scene changes, instead, three crew members held colorful banners at the front of the stage to block the view. This again was deliberate, it prevented the viewers from getting too close to the drama. Brecht uses several vehicles: narrative style, masks, disconnected scenes, and improvised curtains to achieve distancing (In the Second Scene, players waved rolls of aqua blue cloth to represent water). Brecht believed that the viewer should not identify with the characters, rather, he should observe with detachment. According to Marxist theory, a contemporary audience would be unable to identify directly with the narrative, since people behave according to their historical context.

Susan Betti (W), playing Grusha, acted brilliantly from beginning to finish, yet it seemed she played her part too highly for Brechtian drama, allowing the audience to identify too much with her feeling her emotions and grieving over her disappointments.

Owen Doyle '83 played Adak except throughly. Through this character, Brecht examines the problem of justice in a corrupt world, equating cruelty, selfishness, and violence with capitalism. Adak the judge gives rulings counter to the evidence presented and to the existing laws, yet, Adak's decisions are what they should be. The missing laws are the colorful banners society, and following them would only produce those situations, a pkark judge or as nearly as he can. In the final scene, Adak recounts the ancient tale of the chalk circle. In this, we find Brecht's explicit alouion: things belong to those who treat them best. This is Brecht's solution to the world's anarchy and political scars of Eastern Europe after the ravages of WW II.

I thoroughly enjoyed this drama. The humor was light and boisterous, however, for someone as sarcastic, disillusioned and violently antibourgeois as Brecht, I would have expected the humor to be a bit more sour. The production, though, went beyond the Brechtian confines of drama to produce a truly memorable event.

Jonathan P. Dippert

The piece is, in essence, a long, but entertaining joke that affords the wisdom: "There are some men who aren't good for women.

What seemed to be missing from the lecture was any discussion of the writer's craft as practiced by Ellison. Although he goes to great pains to explain how his stories came to be, he tells us nothing of how they are written. A large lecture is not the proper forum for this topic since large audiences come not to learn but to be entertained, but perhaps a series of guest lectures sponsored by the Writing Program would expose would-be authors to the man who has almost singlehandedly championed the cause of substantial writing in science fiction.

Harlan Ellison will return to MIT some time in the future and some of us who saw this lecture will be at his exit. There will be a new audience for him to entertain, and although the temptation to perform will be great, perhaps this time the lecture will report, heed the call of his Ticktockman, and present just himself.