

REVIEW

GARY NORMAN



WRITING ON THE WALL: Jessica Tidd.

Life During Wartime

THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE IS A SPRAWLING MIX OF POLITICS AND COMEDY.

The *Caucasian Chalk Circle* is a dense play. There are multiple story lines. There's a play within a play, and another play within that play. It's three hours long.

Set during World War II, Bertolt Brecht's modernist epic tells the story of a town near the Caucasus Mountains. The town's governor gets beheaded by the militant Ironshirts. In the chaos of fleeing the rebellion, the governor's wife (Clara Hillier) leaves behind her infant son. Grusha (Samie Pfeifer), a maid in the governor's house, rises out of the swirling mass of characters as the closest thing to the play's protagonist when she reluctantly takes the abandoned baby on a journey across the mountains.

It's a sprawling, complicated plot. So it's a relief to find that the set for Shaking the Tree's production is so bare. The stage is created by a single ring of audience chairs surrounded by chalkboard walls. The ensemble cast of 12 play a countless rotation of characters, often as campy caricatures—Jessica Tidd plays an animalistic Ironshirt with wide eyes and bared teeth, and in his brief role as the governor, Heath Koerschgen does a Donald Trump impersonation. Using bamboo sticks, the cast create the scenery, too. They hold sticks vertically above their heads to make a forest, and into the form of a triangle for a house. Clifton Holznagel and Briana Ratterman Trevithick serve as our narrators, introducing scenes with hammy smiles and folksy songs played on guitar and accordion.


With weighty dialogue about political revolution, cheeky humor and abstract staging, *Chalk Circle* is a lot to make sense of. But it's also lively and often hilarious, and there are moments that are as imaginative as they are emotionally effective. On Grusha's journey, she has to cross a treacherous mountain pass. In low, dramatic lighting, actors hold a net of interlocking strands of cloth just above the ground. Grusha carefully steps from thin cloth to cloth, weighing it to the ground as the net trembles in sync with a tense violin played by ensemble actor Luisa Sermol.

Holding the attention of an audience over three hours is a feat itself, as is balancing oddball humor with sincere drama. Even with its evocative imagery, *Shaking the Tree* doesn't totally overcome those challenges. But the fact that they get as close as they do is remarkable. SHANNON GORMLEY.

SEE IT: Shaking the Tree, 823 SE Grant St., shaking-the-tree.com. 7:30 pm Thursday-Saturday, 2 pm Sunday, through Nov. 4. \$10-\$30.



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