

# UNIVERSITY NEWSBEAT

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## Caucasian Chalk Circle encourages risk



Kathy Kinchen (Gruska) and Ayesha Young (Mother-in-law)

Many stories can be told about the Theatre Department's upcoming production of Bertolt Brecht's magnificent *Caucasian Chalk Circle* which opens in Burton Auditorium February 12. The effect of the play on the actors and the actors on the play, the potential impact on the audience, and the special experience for York theatre students in presenting the Circle within the university community instead of in any professional theatre, are only just a few.

Circle's cast and crew have learned many lessons while in preparation for the production. For example, "There are times when you have to choose between being human and having good taste" (Brecht). The need to risk, to care, to be involved were other messages that came through from the author, a noted German emigré and playwright who was tried by the House for Un-American Activities in the States during the McCarthy era for his outspoken

Marxist views and his concern for social justice.

Chalk Circle director Neil Dainard and student dramaturge Wendy Berner both emphasize how the cast, crew and the text have grown together from the initial discussions last September to the first full-scale production meeting in November, to the assignment of parts in December, to the current production which is now in final rehearsal.

Brecht's original prologue was totally rewritten by Ms. Berner so that the play begins not in a war-ravaged Caucasian village following World War II, but instead in a museum in Pravakia in 1985. Pravakia, a very small, very real country bordered by Rumania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia, wants independence from mother Russia. Russia threatens to intervene if this continues. The play begins in darkness, as an air raid practice siren has just sounded.

There are two reasons behind both the rewritten prologue and the

new ten minute improvisation developed to lead into Brecht's original story: (1) to make the meaning of the Chalk Circle and its inherent struggle for justice real and alive for the contemporary audience, and (2) to provide the theatre students with an unusual and broadening experience in playwriting, radio play work, and improvisation, and again, to draw them into Brecht's whole philosophy of "You don't just see things in a theatre, you share an experience."

The experience they shared transformed the meaning of "justice" from an intellectual concept that was somebody else's business, to a felt experience that was the concern of each individual.

Students normally divorced from politics and disdainful of advertising willingly accepted their role in a bizarre and wonderful campus publicity campaign for *Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

For example, in one episode small troupes of performers would enter residence dining halls single file under a Brecht banner and form a tight circle. Their humming, at first quite soft, swells to a high volume then halts abruptly. A Brecht poem follows loud enough for all casual diners to hear in amazed wonder. And then they exit, just as formally as they entered.

Director Neil Dainard grinned as he recalled some of these episodes of street theatre. People-unaccustomed to having their space penetrated were often hostile and sometimes abusive while captive in the audience, but then would approach the performers individually afterwards to discover what the poetic com-

motion was all about.

He also praised the 'nudity' of street theatre, in that it forces the actor to risk everything to be understood. Neither the actor nor the audience can remain safe and comfortable, he explained, as there is no physical distance to separate them, and no protecting blindness of lights to distort the truth of the encounter. Dainard, like Brecht, regards the honesty, immediacy, and risk of this kind of experience as being necessary for the performer's development, as a communicator of real feelings and ideas.

Michele Collison, who visited York to do master classes in movement with the Chalk Circle actors, echoed the importance of risk, and pointed out the two ways theatre often keeps itself safe: (1) actors can often be fearful and choose not to dare, and (2) directors can be conservative and deny the opportunity to risk.

At York theatre students have experienced Brecht and *Caucasian Chalk Circle* in a way they never could have downtown or in any theatre across the Country. They had time. The exercised the willingness to grow with one another and to get inside the text.

In coming to know the playwright and his time they met Frau Thiele and Fred Spoerly, contemporaries of Brecht who had known him before and after World War II, and who understood the expressionist movement in both Germany and America. Students discovered the influence on Brecht of Chinese Theatre, the theatre of Max Reinhardt, and the paintings of Breugel, and studied artists Käthe Kollwitz and George

Grosz who were working at the same time as Brecht and carrying much the same humanist message.

Burton's production of *Chalk Circle* is a work in process, says director Dainard. In reflecting over all the changes and realizations of the past month he feels that the play could keep changing for the actors for months to come as they experienced it on different levels and with different associations. Dainard is keeping close to Brecht in this practice of giving his actors time. Brecht himself worked with his company for at least six months on any particular production.

Inspired by an ancient Chinese tale, *Chalk Circle* is an epic comic drama which presents the question "To whom does the royal child belong—to the common maid who adopted and cared for him, or to the mother by birth who forgot and abandoned him?"

Aside from making a stunning story of love and courage, this presents a fascinating allegory for the social situation of the time: who indeed should govern the country—the drunken judge with a sense of humour and humanity, or the tyrannical governors and landowners whose wealth and power have made them use and abuse the peasants who serve them. Only the chalk circle can decide who the true parent will be, and who can bring justice to the land.

The *Caucasian Chalk Circle* will be presented in Burton Auditorium February 12 through 17 at 8 pm with matinees on February 13 and 15 at 2 pm. Admission is free, and tickets may be obtained from the Burton Box Office weekdays 11 am to 2 pm.

## YORK WOMEN'S CENTRE PREPARES FOR INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

With International Women's Day fast approaching, the York Women's Centre is active preparing for their on campus celebrations March 6, 7, and 8. However, this is only one item in an already busy schedule of activities and events.

The history of International Women's Day illustrates the roots of the Women's Movement itself. In 1908 a fire in a garment factory in New York City burned to death 80 trapped women workers. The next day a march by working women throughout the city protested the miserable and thoroughly unsafe working conditions. Within ten years this march became an international event repeated annually to either protest unsatisfactory conditions or simply to celebrate womanhood itself.

Last year in Toronto over 2,000 women marched down Yonge Street to City Hall, and even greater numbers are expected this year.

This year's celebrations at York will emphasize the internationality of the event by focussing on the nature of women and their treatment in different countries all over the world. Groups on Dutch, Brazilian, Israeli, and African women can be co-ordinated by York women from those countries who are already part of the Centre. Other seminars will include "Immigrant Women in Canada," "Women in the Media," and

"Women in Art."

Representatives from the Rape Crisis Centre will give a self defense demonstration, and show participants how to take command of a threatening situation and avoid becoming a victim of muggers and rapists.

"The Women's Movement had to be radical when it first started in order to attract political attention to the needs of women and to initiate change," says Mimi Mekler, Co-ordinator of the York Women's Centre. But it seems time and relentless feminist prodding have already accomplished this recognition of the women's cause, and Ms. Mekler now sees the importance of the Women's Centre at York as a meeting place for all women concerned with finding their place and identity in this changing world.

"It's ironic," reports the Co-ordinator, "that just as women are becoming conscious of the need for personal reevaluation and for a possible change in their work or home situation, the government is drying up funding to women's organizations." At the moment the Centre is surviving on a substantial grant from Atkinson College, and on several smaller subsidies from the Colleges and CYSF.

Symptomatic of the need for extensive women's activities is the popularity of "A day for Mature Women Students", a one-day symposium co-sponsored by York (through the Office of the Advisor

to the President on the Status of Women), and Centennial College on Saturday February 10 on the Glendon College Campus.

With 450 registrants, this conference is already filled to capacity. Sandra Pyke, Advisor to the President on the Status of Women, said that she hopes that another conference can be set up through York to accommodate the large numbers of people who had to be turned away.

Despite its limited resources, the Centre's programming is constant, diverse, and stimulating. It acts as a major resource and referral centre for women. Do you need a divorce lawyer, rape crisis counselling, training in self defence? Do you want to join a consciousness raising group or discover how a housewife fits into the Women's Movement? Do you want to research feminism and consult the Virginia Rock Collection, a major library on women's studies, which offers many publications and clippings not otherwise readily available? The Centre can either provide the resources or direct you to someone who can.

Also, two low-key, informal talk groups are offered where women of similar experience and diverse backgrounds can trade information and share their realizations. One is for lesbians and the other is for mature women.

This year's ongoing schedule of lectures has already presented talks as diverse as "Marriage and

Career Plans for York Women", "The Kikuyu Women of Kenya," and "Androgyny" Other coming events include a meeting with Elsie Hanna, founder of the York University Staff Association, at noon on February 8, and a noon talk on "Feminism and Prostitution" by Prof. Johanna Stuckey, Chairman of the Division of Humanities on February 15th. The Monday 1 pm Film series continues with *Suicide* on February 12, and with *Rape: Women and the Law* on February 26.

All events of concern to women are posted on the bulletin board at the Women's Centre. These events can be those hosted by the Women's Centre itself, by campus groups such as CYSF or the Colleges, or by off-campus organizations such as that of the Women for Political Action. Notices from employment and management training bodies such as Times Change and the Women's Conference Institute are also posted.

The Centre welcomes all York women — faculty, staff, and students — and encourages them to help direct not only the International Women's Day celebrations, but also the activities of the Centre itself. All decisions are made collectively by members of the Centre.

The atmosphere is relaxed and casual for drop-in visitors. The

Women's Centre, located in Room 102 Behavioural Sciences Building is open weekdays Monday-Thursday 9 am - 7 pm, and Friday 9 am - 5 pm.

For further information call 667-3484, or, better still, drop by for coffee and take a look around.

### Volunteers wanted for Arts Centre

York University Fine Arts on Markham (YUFAM), located in the former David Mirvish Gallery in downtown Toronto, is looking for volunteers to help mount its extensive performance and exhibition schedule.

A number of possibilities are being offered: volunteers can help hang exhibitions, tour the shows as guides, organize opening receptions, take theatre tickets or usher for any of the coming dance, music, and theatre performances, or they can handle reception duties and inform visitors of all that's going on and what's coming up.

YUFAM, which has just opened at 596 Markham St. (just west of Bathurst and south of Bloor), is being operated by the Faculty of Fine Arts. For further information contact Caroline Lanphier at 532-2885.