

Path was rocky but destination clear for 'Chalk Circle' team

We call this regular column "Perspectives." It's our chance to reflect on the process of putting together the last mainstage show. This month's contributor, David Hlavsa, was Assistant to the Director on *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and was responsible for locating the archival images used in the projections.

By David Hlavsa

None of us had ever really done this before. We all knew something about some aspect of creating a theatre piece with slides. But this was Brecht. And then there was the *scale* of the thing.

I often wondered, in the blur of organizational meetings that was the end of summer, whether anyone really had mastered all the details of all the projection sequences. If Dan Sullivan had (he always *seemed* to), he must have had an auxiliary brain devoted solely to slides. Organizing and disseminating information among the collaborators as they arrived on the scene became an issue in itself. Eventually, a storyboard format was specially developed to incorporate the status, at any given point in the show, of projections (front and rear), which doors and/or windows in the set were open or closed, positioning of actors, lighting cues and sound effects (when integral to the image), and finally, who was responsible for making what happen

when. The format was a great help, but it wasn't an answer; communication was still so complex and difficult that at one point, punch-drunk from a particularly grueling day of meetings and meta-meetings, I turned to the Rep's Design Associate and asked, "Randy...who's *driving*?"

In fact, Dan was. Throughout the journey, if often unsure of what path they should take next, Dan was always clear to his collaborators about the destination. The slides were always envisioned, selected, evaluated in accord with a strong set of goals, a sense of what the slides needed to accomplish.

For one thing, they had to help tell the story. After all, how is a designer to get Grusha to all those places without using treadmills, turntables and/or tons of hydraulic scene-shifting equipment? Dan and scenic designer Ralph Funicello saw the new mediatheatre technology as a means both to push themselves and the Rep into new artistic territory and as part of a re-envisioning of the play. The slides would not only move us through the countryside (as a turntable had in Brecht's 1954 production), they would also, by turns, take us inside Grusha's mind, underscore events by enlarging details, comment politically on Azdak's songs, and so on. The story of a play is not composed simply of events, but of their connotations, their emotional

intensity, their significance, as well. Brecht's narrator describes events by spoken word; the slides were to be a second narrator, inflating, expanding or undermining events by image.

Projections were also seen as a way of strengthening the text and renewing its relevance. The play's Marxist/utopian "moral"—that tools will someday be given to those who can best use them, children to those who can best nurture them—seemed strong enough to take care of itself. But *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is also about the lower class as victims of war—war fought solely in the interest of their oppressors. The decision to set the play not in feudal Caucasia but in the Middle East after World War II was designed to give the audience a dual perspective on the text, to shed new light on Brecht's original vision. The harsh resonances of Afghanistan, Lebanon and Iran—places that conjure the most powerful of emotions, associations and ideas—were to play off Brecht's didactic poetry, his 40-year-old parable of war and ownership. The slides were to make the world of the victim as vivid as possible.

And so we all set 'out to realize these goals with concrete images. Location shots were organized, models built, plans adopted and discarded. Technical rehearsals loomed in the immediate

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Before any slides were shot, the design team created a storyboard showing how each projection should look. Below: A rendering of Grusha's brother and sister-in-law from the storyboard. Right: The actual projection, with actress Marianne Owen in foreground.

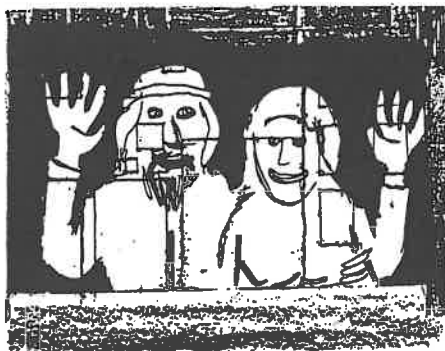


Photo: Chris Remington

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future. During an impossibly short rehearsal period, Dan took great pains to anticipate the possibilities and limitations of the projection sequences and stage the scenes accordingly. The actors came to grips with a number of anticipated technical peculiarities—taller actors would have to stay further downstage so as not to cast a shadow on the screen, etc. Everyone knew it was going to get rough, but it seemed that we were ready.

The first encounter of actors and slides, however, was even more awkward than we had foreseen. Such

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was the size and unwieldiness of our audiovisual behemoth that, during the first technical rehearsals, carefully staged scenes were squashed to a pulp with the appalling regularity of an endless loop of *Bambi Meets Godzilla*. Dan restaged much of the show. Projection designer Kirby Malone re-edited sequence after slide sequence. Music was rewritten, lights hung in new places. It was an arduous task getting all of the elements of the show to hang together. First preview was the first time we got through it all without stopping. Nonetheless, the show opened to enthusiastic audiences and excellent reviews.

Critical acclaim is always tricky. It makes it easier to lose oneself in a haze of well-deserved relaxation. True, the mind needs time to heal after the intensity of a protracted creative process, but after the pause comes the time for evaluation. I think it safe to say that all those who worked on the projections felt triumph at what worked as well or better than we had dreamed and loss at what was never fully realized. After the accomplishment of production comes the greater accomplishment of learning.

None of us had ever really done this before. All things considered, it all went remarkably well.

Times change but volunteers always needed

By Ilse Oles

The other day, I walked through Volunteer Park, dodging shiny brown chestnuts which fell from the trees along the way, and it occurred to me how "volunteerism" has changed in recent years. Of course the park was named for the soldiers who volunteered to fight for this country, but there are many causes and organizations which depend on the help of volunteers for their survival. Among arts organizations this need is obvious. In some of our fine musical groups and theatres even the artists are volunteers, hoping that, after a period of struggle, recognition and remuneration will follow.

Volunteer help is required by all the performing arts as well as by medical organizations, churches, schools, community and political groups. There isn't enough "person-power" to go around, and some of us try to do too many things in answer to the numerous appeals. It becomes necessary to parcel out our valuable time to the group which offers the greatest interest and satisfaction.

Traditional women's organizations are certainly open to males as well, but very few men can join a group of volunteers which meets in the daytime during standard working hours. Prime candidates for arts volunteers have always been women whose children are in school or on their own, or whose preschoolers are easily left with a friend or relative. In recent years, many such women have gone back to school, or taken paying jobs to help maintain the higher living standard to which they aspire. In fact, some former volunteers have applied the knowledge and skills they learned in volunteer work to enter the job market.

The Seattle Repertory Theatre has always had a strong volunteer group called SRO. As one of the major resident theatres in the country, The Rep's professional staff has increased over the years but, nonetheless, the work of volunteers is vital in the day-to-day operation.

We have been very fortunate in the relationship between volunteers and

Hughes often come to our meetings staff. Managing Director Ben Moore, Artistic Director Dan Sullivan and Associate Artistic Director Doug and express appreciation and praise for the work of SRO. To them we are not only hands that get the job done, but people worth knowing as part of the theatre family. Many lasting friendships have blossomed between volunteers working together on theatre projects. Our monthly meetings and programs are open to subscribers. Please note time and place listings in this column.

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A theatre tour and information meeting for new SRO members was held on November 2. President Sallye Knudson welcomed people who joined recently and answered many questions about the theatre and our volunteer activities.

The first SRO-sponsored event of the season was a great success: about 300 guests enjoyed wines and delicious hors d'oeuvres at the newly redecorated Mirabeau Restaurant on top of the 1001 Fourth Avenue Plaza Building (also known as the box the Space Needle came in). The view of the sunset was spectacular, and SRO earned some \$3,500 for the theatre, according to Nancy Mertel, chairman of the event. Fifteen SRO members modeling costumes from past Rep productions engendered happy memories of plays enjoyed in past seasons.

The next general SRO meeting will take place on Thursday, December 10 at the Bagley Wright Theatre. Our usual format is: coffee in the lobby around 10:15 a.m., meeting and program in the theatre from 10:30 a.m. to noon. Artistic Director Daniel Sullivan has again "volunteered" to provide a special holiday program, perhaps even a sequel to his side-splitting skit of last year! Following the program, the theatre staff will host a luncheon for SRO members. Reservations need to be made by calling Claire Hennum, 282-3075, or Cathy Sander at the theatre office, 443-2210.

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