

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

Carey Perloff, Artistic Director

PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

The Caucasian Chalk Circle

BY BERTOLT BRECHT

TRANSLATED BY DOMENIQUE LOZANO

DIRECTED AND DESIGNED BY JOHN DOYLE

ORIGINAL MUSIC BY NATHANIEL STOOKEY

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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A LITTLE BIT OF AN ANARCHIST

An Interview with Director John Doyle about *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*

BY ELIZABETH BRODERSEN (JANUARY 25, 2010)

In 2005, John Doyle's multi-award-winning, stripped down, all-instruments-on-deck—some have said “neo-Brechtian”—production of Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* upended the conventional musical theater world with its reimagining of the lavish stage spectacle Broadway musical audiences had come to expect.

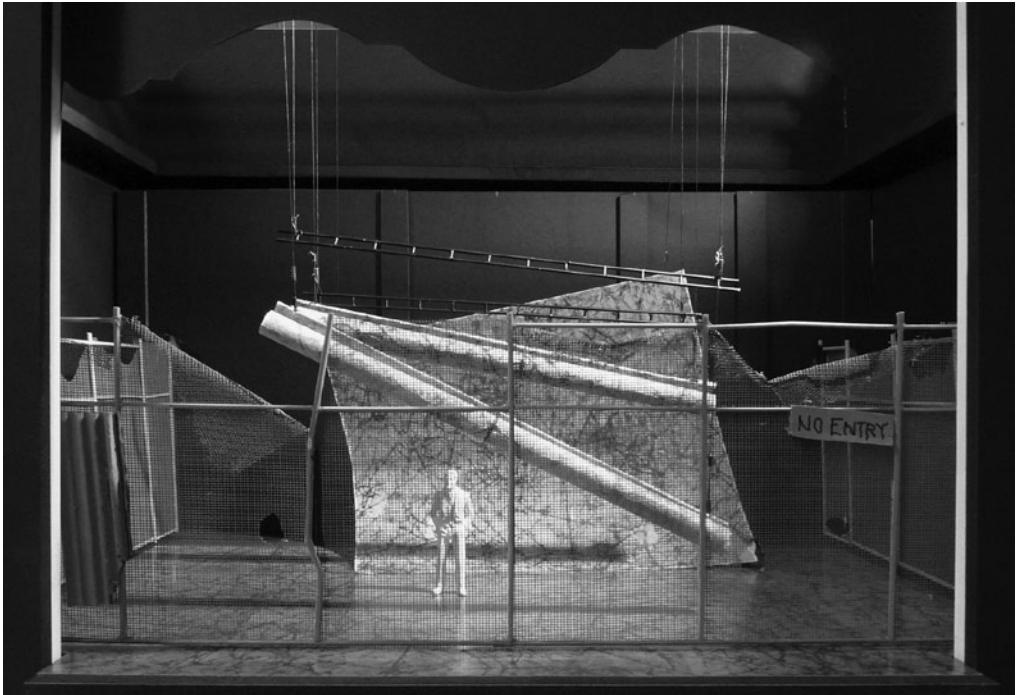
While he admits to having studied with a member of Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble (while at the University of Georgia on a fellowship at the age of 20), Doyle laughs when told—as he is repeatedly—that his working style is influenced by Brecht. “If I read that something is Brechtian, I think, ‘Oh I'm not going, it'll be dreary,’” he has said. “There is a danger of thinking about Brecht, ‘Oh I don't get emotionally involved,’ and I don't think that's good theater. Brecht's theater is vital and alive. I see a danger in getting too much involved in it as a philosophy.”

A British theater veteran who has in his distinguished career run four theaters as artistic director and staged more than 200 productions, Doyle credits the development of his aesthetic to a fundamental pragmatism born of economic necessity. In 1992 he found himself at Liverpool's Everyman Theatre with the desire to direct Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*—and almost no budget. He realized he had just enough money to pay either a cast or an orchestra, but not both. So he found a way to make ten actor-musicians, working on a nearly empty set with the simplest of props, fill both job descriptions. In the process, he discovered what many consider a radical new way of making theater.

It is nevertheless the power of storytelling that remains front and center in his work. For Doyle—who has applied his bare-bones approach to numerous classic works of music theater, including *Pal Joey*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Mack and Mabel*, *Cabaret*, *Company*, and *Oklahoma!*, as well as recent productions of Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* for The Metropolitan Opera, Brecht's *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* for Los Angeles Opera, Chekhov's *Three Sisters* for Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, and Sondheim's new *Road Show* for The Public Theater—it is all about the story and the audience's connection to it. Doyle's creative approach is at heart “about giving the theater back to the actor, and is asking the audience to let go of all the stuff they knew as ‘theater’ and to take part in the story that's being told.



John Doyle



Set model for *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* by director/designer John Doyle

“The major resource is the imagination of the audience,” he says. “My job is to tap that imagination. I like to think *that’s* my trademark.”

WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO DIRECT *THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE*?

First of all, it’s a human story. When you really get down to it, it’s a simple story about human beings and about right and wrong. There’s a moral to the tale, and that interested me. But also, I suppose I’m drawn to the fact that the story allows for a particular method of storytelling. It’s nonnaturalistic. It’s not a well-made play . . . it’s beautifully made, but the classical idea of the well-made play is one with a beginning, a development, a climax, and an end, and this is not structured that way. It’s structured in a series of almost vaudevillian episodes, little vignettes one after the other, and that asks the director to do a lot of work in terms of how all of the scenes and images have contrast and theatricality, and I’m drawn to that kind of material.

WHY WERE YOU INTERESTED IN COMING BACK TO A.C.T. TO DIRECT?

The only time I’ve been in San Francisco was to see [my] production of *Sweeney Todd* [which launched its national tour at A.C.T. in the fall of 2007]. I came here for the week-

end, and I thought: “Wow, it’s really quite nice here.” I particularly like the feeling of [A.C.T.’s] auditorium, I like the feeling of the city, and I’m drawn to the idea that there is a permanent company in this organization. In the United Kingdom, I was raised with that. I started a company myself when I was a very young man, 21 or 22 years old, to take theater to the highlands of Scotland, which is where I come from. We bought a van from the post office for five pounds—that’s less than ten dollars in today’s money—and toured the highlands for five years, working with the same actors all the time. I really enjoyed the business of all being together and storytelling together, the infuriating things about that, as well as the joys of that. That was something about theater that really attracted me, because I continued to work in a series of organizations that had that ethos. Also, I really was intrigued by the idea that there is a conservatory as a part of the organization, that skills can be passed down the line or up the line, depending on how you look at it. So, I said to [A.C.T. Artistic Director] Carey [Perloff] that I would like to do the project with the resident company and with some of the students together, so that they are working together and teaching each other. I liked the energy that you have here. I don’t know how you make that a tangible thing, but I was intrigued by that.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THAT ENERGY?

I think that the house itself has something about it; you can usually tell when you walk into an old theater, you can smell what’s happened there before. I’m not normally drawn to working within the proscenium arch; most of my career I’ve done everything I could to destroy it, or get out of it, or rip out the seats and do something else. I’m a little bit of an anarchist as far as all that is concerned. But I’ve sat in your auditorium a few times now, and I’ve enjoyed the relationship between the house and the stage. The stage doesn’t feel too high, which a lot of American stages do. And that’s quite important to how I work, because I absolutely believe that the barrier, the fourth wall, if you might call it that—I have a sense of a sort of responsibility to break it. I suppose that’s why I’ve become known for doing musical theater. I like musicals but never set out to be a director of musicals. I did set out, I think, if you ever know what you’re doing as a younger artist, I did set out to try to “pretend,” or to forget the pretense that there was a wall between us and the audience. I think that’s partly to do with coming from Scotland, being Celtic, having the *ceili* storytelling tradition, where you sat in a circle as a family and you told a story. I love that feeling in a theater. But I’m not so comfortable when the actors pretend that the audience isn’t there; I find that a little more problematic. I like that idea that we all turn up at the same . . . I like to think of it as the same altar at the same time.

WHAT DO YOU EXPECT THE AUDIENCE TO BRING TO THIS PRODUCTION?

I don't expect them to know anything about Bertolt Brecht. I don't expect anybody to have done any homework. I would like them to bring an openness, a willingness to listen and watch. But most importantly—and it is my job and the actors' job to access this—I do ask the audience to use its imagination. Some of your audience will have seen *Sweeney Todd*, and in that production there's no question about the fact that people had to imagine. Ten actors who played instruments were all in the same space at the same time, telling an epic story with very little visual help—a coffin, a ladder, chairs—which asked the audience to see its own barber's chair, or its own pie shop, in the case of that story. In this piece we've got huge things that we have to do: we have to cross a bridge that nearly breaks, we have to imagine that we are outside a palace, we have to imagine that we're hiding from the army, and so forth, and yet it's only nine performers on a pretty empty stage. The audience has to fill in the rest, and that's what I mean about breaking the fourth wall, really: to try to get away from the passivity of, "Okay, show me," as opposed to, "Oh, I have to lean in towards this, I have to go towards the storyteller." That's what I'd like the audience to feel is happening to them. My job is to set up a world that accesses that.

WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR INSPIRATIONS FOR THIS PRODUCTION?

I wanted the production to feel like it was happening at a time of destruction, or a time of war, in a culture at war. But I didn't want that environment to be a remote time; if we make it a war that was "way back then in olden times," we perhaps might not take responsibility for what's happening right now. After all, we *are* at war.

I always tend to start from visual inspiration. I looked at imagery of various wars of the 20th century—the photographs of the Spanish Civil War are remarkable, through Vietnam, and what we watch on CNN every morning. Also, when I came here, I looked at some visual imagery of what had happened to your theater at the time of the [1989] earthquake, when the theater nearly was destroyed. So I thought, "Perhaps I can access some of that imagery, as a place of storytelling that was unsafe for a period of time." I thought the fact that we're telling this story in that unsafe environment could be interesting.

This is a world with a space that has somehow been condemned, and is enclosed by a cage. It's a world of storytelling that we're not allowed to enter, a world where the story is banned. We are excluded from the story. People come into the space, which is, at the beginning, empty. It's an empty theater space. It's a smaller empty theater space than [A.C.T.'s] natural theater space, so we're asking the audience to imagine a theater space within a theater space. So they're already having to do something. There is no curtain when they come in, so they're already seeing whatever it is. It'll probably look a little bleak, which

is typical of me, I'm afraid. Hopefully it won't always, but it might start by looking like that. Then people come into the space to tell a parable.

YOU TALKED EARLY ON ABOUT THE NOTION OF “INNOCENCE IN A DANGEROUS LANDSCAPE.” IS THAT IDEA STILL IN YOUR MIND?

Yes. I'm fascinated by a number of things in any story I tell. Innocence in a dangerous landscape is one of them. Sorry to refer back to *Sweeney Todd* again, but the angle of that was told through the eyes of the most innocent person on the stage, Toby [played on Broadway by A.C.T. Associate Artist Manoel Felciano, who plays the Singer in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*]. I tend to be drawn toward seeing the story through the eyes of the vulnerable. I'm also very interested in the “extraordinary in the ordinary,” that ordinary people behave often in very extraordinary ways. I think it's what makes humanity special, and I do feel a responsibility as a storyteller to reflect that. I think one of the great things about theater is that it's something that can remind us that “we are all the same.” The performer and audience in [the theater] also have sameness. That's very beautiful. And specifically in this play, I think the combination of light and darkness, the potential slaughter of the innocent coupled with the result that the innocent isn't slaughtered after all, is beautiful.

DO YOU FIND THIS TO BE A HOPEFUL PLAY?

I think that the central idea—Who is the rightful parent? Who has the right to ownership? Is it the person who looks after [the child], rather than the person who takes advantage?—is hopeful. I think it's a good time to be telling that story. Well, it's always a good time, that's the sadness of human beings, that that's the case. So yes, I do think it's hopeful.

YOU HAVE BECOME KNOWN FOR A VERY COLLABORATIVE WAY OF WORKING IN THE REHEARSAL ROOM. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THAT PROCESS?

It's rooted in the idea, well, in one word, which is the word “play.” We go to see a play, and we go to see people play. Sometimes I think we forget that the starting point in most of our lives is to play. From very early on we are asked to imagine, and then probably around the age of seven we are told to stop doing that. My function as a director is to access the possibility of playing. And to ask the actor to be playful, without setting them up. I don't use improvisation, at all, and I never have. I do constantly set different tasks, create an interrelationship, and then infuse into that a different atmosphere, a different quality. I very seldom say, “No.” I don't believe that there is a right or wrong—I do morally, but I'm talking about this way of working. I might say that something is inappropriate to the storytelling style, but not necessarily say that we shouldn't try it, or shouldn't do it. I try not