The Caucasian Chalk Circle

Study Guide

Presented by the University of Massachusetts-Amherst Department of Theater
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The Caucasian Chalk Circle: Synopsis

*The Caucasian Chalk Circle* tells a parable that explores what happens when the law conflicts with justice and asks questions about who is right and wrong in complicated situations. Setting up the play, a Prologue introduces the idea that things should be given to those who will take care of them as two farms dispute ownership of a valley. Once an agreement has been reached, the villagers put on a play—*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

The play begins as an uprising takes place in Grusinia (a fictional historic country in the Caucasus). When Governor Abashvili is overthrown and beheaded, his wife, Natella, flees the new regime, leaving her infant son, Michael, behind. A palace kitchen maid, Grusha, steals the child away so that it won't fall into the hands of the new regime. Pursued by soldiers, Grusha undertakes a risky journey to carry the child to the other side of the mountains, where it will be safe, ‘adopting’ the child in the process. Two years later, when the political situation reverts, soldiers cross the mountains and take Michael away from Grusha, charging her with kidnapping the child.

Grusha and Natella must appear in court to fight for custody of the child; the court in which the case will be judged is slightly unusual. Ever since the uprising in which the Governor was overthrown, Azdak has been presiding as Judge. Azdak is a rascal whose judicial decisions are highly unconventional, as they are guided not by the letter of the law, but instead by bribes and his own ideas of justice. The unconventional judge ultimately devises an unconventional scheme to decide who should be given the child—the test of the chalk circle. The results of this test convince Azdak to award the boy to Grusha.

— Liana Thompson

### Pre-Show Discussion Questions

Imagine you are at the mall. You find a spiffy iPod nano that someone has clearly dropped without noticing. What do you do? How far will you go to track down the owner of the iPod? What if you find two $100 dollar bills on the floor of the mall? Do you handle the situation the same way you handled the iPod? Why or why not?

Imagine you are in Boston and you are riding on the T and someone in your car is physically threatened. Do you intervene and inflict physical harm on someone else to protect that person? Do you intervene if the threatened person is your friend? What if the threatened person is a stranger who happens to be sitting near you? Do you intervene if by helping that person you put yourself in danger?

Imagine you find a stray dog in your neighborhood. It is malnourished, scarred and scared, and it looks like no one has been taking care of it. Do you take it in? Now imagine you do take it in and a week later you see flyers in the neighborhood advertising a missing dog. You realize that the dog you took in is the missing dog. Do you return it? What if you suspect that the people seeking it had been abusing it?
Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956)

Bertolt Brecht is arguably the 20th Century’s single most important influence on theater. In his career he wrote several plays that have come to be well-known and respected including *The Threepenny Opera* (on which he collaborated with musician Kurt Weill), *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Life of Galileo*, *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Brecht also wrote about the theater; these theoretical writings have effected what our theater looks and sounds like ever since.

Born and raised in Germany, Brecht started writing in his early twenties at the same time that he was starting to flirt with radical, non-mainstream politics. Brecht ultimately became a Marxist, and Marxist ideas such as class consciousness and opposition to those who determine the structure/ideals of society or own the means of production worked their way into his writing. Because of his politics, Brecht went into self-exile in 1933 as Hitler first ascended to the German Chancellorship. During his exile Brecht’s writing flourished, and he penned many of his most well-known plays and his most important theoretical work.

Taking refuge in the United States beginning in 1941, Brecht was soon pronounced an “enemy alien” when the United States joined World War II late that year. Like other German immigrants, he was given a registration number, restricted to an area within a five-mile radius of his home, and not allowed outside after dark. During this bleak time he wrote *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, completed in the summer of 1944 as the war turned in the Allies’ favor. He intended the play to be produced on Broadway starring American actress Luise Rainer in the role of Grusha, but a falling out between Rainer and Brecht prevented the production, and it did not premiere until 1948.

Brecht’s stay in America ended abruptly in 1947, after he was forced to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. In 1949 Brecht finally returned to Germany when he went to East Berlin to help stage *Mother Courage and Her Children*. This production resulted in his founding a theater company, The Berliner Ensemble, with his wife, actress Helene Weigel. Thus Brecht was able to bring his work back to Germany; he spent the rest of his life working with the Berliner Ensemble and putting on stage, in Berlin, some of the plays he had written during his years of exile.

—Liana Thompson

Terms to know:

*Parable* — A story that illustrates a moral or lesson.

*Adaptation* — The process of taking a source material and retelling its story in a different context or form.
An Interview With the Director

Liana Thompson recently sat down with Keith Langsdale, the director of UMass' production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* to discuss his approach to and thoughts on Brecht’s play.

LT: What about *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* particularly speaks to you?
KL: First, the idea of nurturing, which is portrayed by the question of who is the real mother for the child. Deciding this relies on making an assessment of what real nurturing is. Society has a need and a responsibility to take care of its own and others. In this piece Brecht is commenting on that responsibility, offering that nurturing is a deciding factor in allotting land, resources, or even a child.

The other theme that really speaks to me in this play is the idea of justice. What is justice? Does it have anything to do with the law? Are the two even compatible? Is justice outside the law? And can justice ever be truly reached with a strict reading of the law?

LT: In addition to themes, what kinds of influences have been propelling your approach to directing this piece?
KL: I was looking at paintings last fall and was particularly struck by those that had some kind of ordered chaos. With some input from the scenic designers, and after a variety of permutations, this led to the towers that we have on stage as part of the set.

I also came across an image of a village in Africa that made a strong impression on me. Rebels were supposedly on their way toward the village and the people had run out into the jungle. They had left a baby behind, and the picture of this baby—crawling and crying, with no one around to care for it—was very striking. That helped to inspire the opening and closing moments of the show, when we have Michael alone on stage.

The idea of circles was also a way into the show—from the beginning there was a desire to incorporate circles into the scenic design. Not only is the circle important because of the one drawn on the ground during the trial scene, in many other ways there are circles throughout the play. So many of the characters’ journeys are circular; both Grusha and Azdak ultimately travel back to where they came from. Nothing stays as it was. Melding the ideas of travel and of circularity, the design team came up with the idea of using a turntable on stage.

LT: The costumes have a Chinese and Tibetan influence to them. Can you tell me a bit about why this was important to you even though the story is not set in eastern Asia?
KL: I always felt that there was an Asian influence in it. Some of this comes from images I looked at that struck me—for instance an image of a Japanese bridge. Another part of it comes from the fact that Brecht admired the presentational quality of the Chinese theater. And in the setting of the play itself—the Caucasus—there is historical reference for it because of the number of cultures that have conquered the region throughout the ages. But what it really boils down to is that it always seemed, to me, like the most interesting way of making the world of the play separate from us.

The costumes make the characters separate from our reality, so that we cannot casually identify with them and their story. Part of what Brecht said about theater is that it should have some distance, and this gives it some distance for us. Looking at the play, our audiences will see a world where the elements don’t always fit together the way you’d expect a world to fit together; the costumes help to establish these incongruities. This is all meant to pull the audience back from the play—to give them some critical distance.

LT: Music is very important in this play, and you’ve been collaborating with composer Andy Lichtenberg to create the music for this production. What kinds of sounds will we hear in the production and what led you to these choices?
KL: When Andy and I started throwing around ideas of what the music might be like for this play, he played me a CD of a group called Bering Strait. The guys in the group were originally from Russia, and the songs they write are a compilation of American country and Russian folk music. It’s hauntingly beautiful—Russian melancholy infused into country western—an amazing sound. That sound was what really inspired us, with a little Klezmer thrown in.

LT: You’ve also been working with Troy David Mercier, a movement trainer. Tell me about the physical work he’s doing with the cast.
KL: The movement work that Troy does with the actors has a group ethic to it that I like, and it helps them to develop a sense that they are supporting each other. To do the movement they have to rely on each other—both...
individual to individual and also as a group. Because they are working so closely as a unit, the actors get to know each other really quickly and learn to trust each other in a very physical way. This is really important because some of the things they work on are actually dangerous. For instance he’s worked with them on creating a human bridge for Grusha to cross, and on movements they can use to fight with each other without hurting each other.

Interview with the director

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fundamentals about costumes

Costume Designer Bethany Marx created 84 costume renderings.
The costume shop will be dyeing 26 shirts and 27 pairs of pants.
Our costume build crew is a group of students, working under the guidance of professionals, first constructed mock-ups of some of the most complicated costumes, using 4 bolts of muslin.
They will use about 185 yards of fabric to create the final products.
Costumes will require about 6 hours of ironing and prepping before every performance and 3-5 loads of laundry after.
How do you learn best? Do you remember things better when you read them or when you hear them? Are you a visual learner? Can you have fun and learn at the same time?

Among Brecht’s most important contributions to the theater were his ideas on “epic theater”—a type of theater that aims to remind its spectators that we are being presented with demonstrations of human behavior, not the real thing. Brecht rebelled against traditional dramatic theater that pretended to be reality and strictly sought audiences’ empathy, arguing that theater should not attempt to make you identify with the characters on stage, but rather should make you watch with critical detachment. However, he knew that emotion and empathy, if channeled properly and paired with rational thought, could motivate people to seek change. So, in his epic theater, Brecht sought to make us think both rationally and emotionally about the social environments that are presented. He does this by creating situations that catch you off guard and make you question your expectations about a character or a moment. As you watch The Caucasian Chalk Circle, look for things that take you by surprise or that make you question your assumptions about characters and their actions.

Brecht was not only about big ideas; he also insisted that above all, theater should entertain. He thus used the tools of populist entertainment—song, spectacle, humor, exotic settings, melodramatic stories, decent characters in dangerous situations—to achieve his theatrical and political aims. The Caucasian Chalk Circle is a testament to Brecht’s ability to energize his political purpose with the pleasures of populist entertainment. It combines unsentimental fairy tale, romance, battles, beheadings, dangerous journeys and a high-stakes trial, all set in a far-flung locale allowing artistic license with costumes and scenery. The narrator relates the action in song; the story of the heroine pits good against evil; the secondary protagonist is a clownish bumbler. Yet the play still manages to raise questions about who is in the right, and how we as a society take responsibility for the care of our lands, our government, our children.

—Liana Thompson

(Sources: Encyclopedia Britannica, South Coast Rep Playgoers Guide, Brecht on Theater)

**Term to know**

**Epic Theater** — A theatrical tradition developed by Brecht in which spectators are supposed to be aware of the fact that they are watching a piece of theater, rather than a slice of reality. Brecht’s aim was to make his audience critical of the characters on stage, rather than strictly empathetic with them.
The stories we read today come from a variety of sources—some are entirely fabricated by their authors, some draw on source material: history, or current events, or sometimes retelling older stories. When stories draw on source material, we must always consider what the relationship of the new story is to its source. What has the author changed and, more importantly, why?

Writing *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* at the end of World War II, Brecht was very much influenced by current events and his own perceptions of the world. However, his story also draws on other pieces of literature—the biblical Story of Solomon, and an anonymous play written in China in the 13th or 14th Century called *The Chalk Circle*.

The story of Solomon tells of two women who both claim to be the mother of a baby boy. The women bring their claim to King Solomon, who sends for a sword and orders for the baby to be cut in half so that each woman can have half of it. The false mother agrees to chopping the baby in half, but the real mother begs that the boy be given to the false mother to save his life. By their reactions, King Solomon determines who the real mother is and awards her the baby.

*The Chalk Circle* similarly tells a story of two women who claim to be the birth mother of the same child. In this scenario, the two women are the first and second wives of a Chinese Lord. The first wife is deceitful and treacherous; the second wife is honest and good. We know from the outset that the second wife is the boy’s true mother, and watch as the evil wife tries to smear her reputation and take the child away from her. In the end, however, the truth comes out and the good wife, the real mother, gets the child.

Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* presents a different scenario that puts forth a more difficult decision. In *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* the real mother is selfish and abandons her son. The adoptive mother is kind and cares for the boy when the real mother leaves him behind. Who should get the boy in this case?

— Liana Thompson

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**Activity**

1. Please read “The Stories We Tell” above. Then, think of a story you have read (either fictional or something from the news) in which there is clearly a good person and a bad person. Write down what the situation is, and who is in the right. Now come up with a way to make the situation more ambiguous: how can you make the good person less clearly good or the bad person less clearly bad? Can you re-imagine the circumstance such that the bad person becomes the good person and is in the right, and the good person is actually revealed to be evil and in the wrong?

2. Next, read “Locating the World of the Play” on the following page. Take the story you thought up wherein you switched around who is good and who is evil, and think about where you might set this story. Is it necessarily in the same location in which your original source story took place? Is there another location that might serve the story better? How will the story change if you relocate it from the city to the countryside? Or from one part of the world to another?

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**Post-Show Discussion Questions**

Is Grusha entirely good? What about her behavior is commendable? How does Brecht make us question her behavior?

Does Azdak do the right thing? What governs his judicial decisions? Is there a pattern to the verdicts he reaches?

Who would you have given Michael to? What should his future be?
Locating the World of the Play

The history of the region in which The Caucasian Chalk Circle is set greatly influences both the play itself and UMass’ production. The Caucasus is a region that bridges Europe and Asia (see map). Spanning the broad isthmus between the Caspian and Black Seas, the Caucasus is divided by the Caucasian mountain range into two regions: on the southern side of the mountains are the modern-day countries Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, the northern slopes of the mountains reach into Chechnya and other border states of the former Soviet Union. The Caucasus Mountains provide a formidable physical barrier between Europe and Asia; however, they have never stood in the way of migrations in either direction. Thus in the Caucasus boast tremendous ethnic and religious diversity on both sides of the mountains.

Because it is an important transitional region between Europe and Asia, the history of the Caucasus includes persistent episodes of warfare, upheaval, invasion and rebellion. Colonized at one time or another by ancient Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Persians, Arabs, Turks, Mongols, and Russians, the region now features extraordinary ethnic and linguistic diversity (more than fifty languages are spoken!). The region has also been a hotbed for insurrection over the centuries, as those who considered it home were forced to rise up against colonizing outsiders.

Grusinia, where The Caucasian Chalk Circle takes place, is a fictionalized version of the countries Georgia and Azerbaijan. The turbulent history of the Caucasus means that the insurrection that takes place at the beginning of the play could have happened at multiple points in time. We have therefore taken artistic liberties with our interpretations of who these people are and what their lives look like.

(Source: South Coast Rep Playgoers Guide)
Sources

Brecht:


Epic Theater:


The Caucasus: