

The Caucasian Chalk Circle: Brecht's parable on "the temptation to do good"

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At the Classic Stage Company, New York City; directed by Brian Kulick; original music by Duncan Sheik

The last major play by German dramatist Bertolt Brecht, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, was written in 1944, during Brecht's exile in the United States. It did not become well known, however, until its premiere in East Berlin, as the opening production in 1954 of the Berliner Ensemble, which Brecht founded after his return to East Germany.

The Classic Stage Company's production in New York, which recently ended a limited run, follows the basic structure of Brecht's play, with some significant changes. The play was originally translated into English by the playwright's longtime collaborator Eric Bentley, but the latest New York staging uses the translation of James and Tania Stern, which dates from the 1960s. Lyrics for the occasional songs were supplied by poet W. H. Auden.

Original music is often composed for productions of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and in this instance it has been supplied by Duncan Sheik, best known for *Spring Awakening*, the 2006 rock musical based on the 1891 German play of the same name by Frank Wedekind (an influence on Brecht, incidentally).

The most important change made by Classic Stage's Artistic Director Brian Kulick, who also directed this production, was the elimination of Brecht's prologue to *Chalk Circle*, and the updating of the setting to the late 20th century amidst the collapse of the Soviet Union. This, as we shall see, is a somewhat confused and mostly wrongheaded move, one that reflects the director's outlook, but is not faithful to the playwright's intentions.

Brecht set his prologue on a collective farm in the USSR, where a fruit-growing farm and a commune dedicated to goat cheese production are quarreling over the use of farmland made available after the defeat of the Nazi invaders. This sets up a play within the play, in which the decision about who is to have the farmland hinges on the outcome of a fable dramatized by the workers.

What is acted out as the main body of the work is in turn based on an old Chinese play on the theme of two women

arguing over the same child. Brecht had first considered this subject many years earlier, as the director explains in his notes for the production, when famed German stage director Max Reinhardt staged a play in 1925 loosely based on a 13th century Chinese play. Brecht set to work on it in 1943 as a possible vehicle for the noted actress Luise Rainer, but she lost interest and the first major production did not take place until 1954, after the playwright had returned to the Stalinist GDR.

The Classic Stage production consisted of two acts. Instead of the prologue, we are given a truncated introduction in which a troupe of Russian actors, whose leader is played by Christopher Lloyd, complain amongst themselves. Their meaning cannot be grasped by anyone who does not speak Russian, but there is a toppled statue that bears a clumsy resemblance to Lenin, and the program notes, in small type, that the "Time/Place" of the action is "Ancient Grusinia but also perhaps the fall of the Soviet Union, when the Hammer and Sickle were replaced by the Coca-Cola bottle."

The actors, presumably living in the years immediately after the dissolution of the USSR, then go about their business. In the first act, set in mythical "Grusinia," a name that is meant to evoke Georgia, in the Caucasus, a despotic governor has been overthrown. His spoiled and arrogant wife (Lea DeLaria) is so busy packing her dresses as she flees that she leaves her baby son behind. A young kitchen maid Grusha (Elizabeth Davis) rescues the infant at great risk to herself. She bids farewell to her fiancé Simon (Alex Hurt), who is off to war.

The leader of the acting troupe (Lloyd) becomes the narrator of the play within the play, and punctuates the action with his asides and explanations. The rest of the act follows the well-meaning Grusha as she tries to navigate her war-torn country with the child of the fallen governor. As an unmarried mother, she must find a husband. She marries a dying farmer, but he suddenly recovers when he hears that the war is ending.

In the second act the governor's wife catches up with

Grusha and demands the return of her son, while the poor kitchen maid resists. Meanwhile, Lloyd emerges in the new and crucial role of Azdak, a former clerk, a corrupt, drunken and generally hapless character who is appointed as the local judge in the general chaos. Azdak wants to ingratiate himself with the ruling elite that has reemerged, but he also winds up handing down decisions that favor the poor and oppressed.

Simon has survived the war, and agrees to claim fatherhood for the son in order to help his beloved Grusha. The widow's lawyers demand that the boy be returned to his biological mother. Azdak announces a Solomonic solution, one that gives the play its name. The two women are to stand within a circle drawn in chalk, and to pull on each of the boy's arms. The one who succeeds in pulling him to her side will be awarded custody.

Afraid to harm the boy, Grusha refuses to pull him towards her. She is given another opportunity, and again refuses, whereupon Azdak announces that, regardless of biological considerations, she has demonstrated her abiding love. At the same time, Azdak manages to divorce Grusha and her "accidental" husband, leaving her free to marry her sweetheart Simon.

There were some clever and amusing moments in this production, and the acting was generally at a high level, with six of the seven-member cast taking on multiple roles. Christopher Lloyd, well known from *Taxi*, the *Back to the Future* trilogy of the 1980s and numerous other films, brought a useful antic quality to Azdak, and the comic moments were well done. Lea DeLaria was properly villainous as the governor's wife, and Davis (a Tony Award nominee for *Once*) and Alex Hurt (William's son) were also effective. Sheik's music was often pleasant, perhaps too pleasant, given the subject matter.

There are weaknesses in the play itself (See "A good deal to chew, and not all of it edible: Brecht and Mother Courage," WSWS 22 March 2004). Certainly *Chalk Circle*, along with Brecht's later work in general, does not have the power and passion of *The Threepenny Opera*, *Mahagonny*, *A Man's a Man* and other earlier works. The playwright, while his genius is still apparent, seems to have mellowed, if one can use that word, in a way that detracts from his talent.

Beyond this issue, however, Kulick's conception of the play raises other issues. First of all, the whole effectiveness of the updating must be questioned. Using Russian dialogue, a toppled statue and a brief program note to conjure up the fall of the Soviet Union does not make very much dramatic sense, and it was not very effective.

Brecht's original version of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* ends with the decision to award the farmland to the fruit growers, those who can make most productive use of it. Whatever the weakness of this theme, Kulick's version

weakens it further by eliminating the prologue and conclusion.

More fundamentally, the director takes what might be termed one element of Brecht's outlook and imposes it in a one-sided fashion onto the present day.

"Change in Brecht is a necessity, but change with a capital C is dangerous and seems only so long before the status quo return," writes Kulick. "Brecht's 'Chalk Circle' knows...that the forces of changes are quickly subdued and almost always subverted by the powers that be (same brute, just a different suit)."

And Kulick goes on, overreaching quite a bit, to claim that the play possesses an "extraordinary power, a power that seems to transcend the historical dead-end that so many of us feel as we watch the nobler aspirations of communism, as well as our own delicate democratic spirit, falter. It tells us simply to do what we can, while we can. It places care for 'the other' front and center. It says, unapologetically, that this, above all else, is the only hope for human kind..."

This is a breathtaking leap. Brecht called himself a Marxist. He was severely affected, in fact, damaged, by the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union and of the international movement that was inspired by the Russian Revolution. Perhaps if he had lived longer he would have openly abandoned his hopes for revolution, as many others did. This does not give Kulick the right, however, to simply interpret the playwright in the spirit of demoralized contemporary liberalism, justifying and rationalizing its own quite comfortable social position with the claim that we will "do what we can, while we can." That kind of thoroughgoing surrender to the status quo is not what Brecht symbolizes, whatever the limitations of his outlook or legacy.



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