

Play Review
Caucasian Chalk Circle

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Benedict is an MSt student in Spanish, who moved to St Anne's college having done his undergrad at LMH. His research interests include 13th century Spanish literature and the role chroniclers had to play in the representation of early Iberian history. He is also active in the theatre scene at the university, having acted in and directed a number of shows during his time here. This review article is an examination of Bertolt Brecht's Caucasian Chalk Circle inspired by a February 2014 student version performed at the Oxford Playhouse. The article discusses the themes of the play and how they are represented on stage, with an introduction to the principles of the style of theatre and its moral message. The main focus of the article, encompassing all the above, is a discussion of why the Brechtian mode of theatre remains relevant over fifty years after the play was first performed.

In the programme notes of Screw the Looking Glass's production of Bertolt Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, the playwright summons a quote to describe a significance of the circle:

'Of course the wheel just goes on turning / What's once on top cannot remain.'

This extract, from the *Ballad of the Waterwheel*, also directs our understanding of the narrative arc of *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, embodied in the rise and fall of people in society and the fluidity of the roles they play. After a brief prologue, where villagers discuss how best to use resources they have recently acquired, we are invited to watch an ancient parable, presented as drama by the singer Arkadi (Jack Sain), alongside the residents of two kolkhoz villages. The source material for this parable, as with much of Brecht's theatre and style, is adapted from Chinese theatrical traditions, more specifically a Fourteenth Century play called 'Circle of Chalk'. Whilst, through the character of Arkadi, the

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playwright acknowledges that his Chalk Circle is different, its relation to its predecessor remains obvious. The story follows a very similar plot line, with the only significant change being the precise moral message in the play.

The first act tells the story of Michael, a child of aristocracy, who is abandoned by his callous mother Natella (Gráinne O'Mahoney) during a coup and rescued by a servant girl, Grusha (Constance Greenfield), on the same day that she promised herself to the Soldier (Leo Suter). Michael and Grusha flee the revolution-gripped city for the countryside and are forced to overcome a series of obstacles including disease and an unwanted marriage, only to be caught and brought back to the city. There, Grusha is made to stand trial; Natella has returned to the city demanding her child back in order to reclaim her late husband's estates, a reminder of the whimsical nature of the nobility and how vulnerable those without power can be. The second act follows the career path of Azdak (Luke Rollason), a clerk who has become an unpredictable judge in the time between Grusha's escape and return. The two narrative threads come together for the Solomon-style judgment, from which the play takes its name, during which Michael will be returned to the person deemed by the judge as his rightful mother. This judgment ultimately echoes the prologue and reinforces the parable being told; that resources should go to those who are most able to use them.

The production did justice to Brecht's script through James and Tania Stern's fluent and intelligible translation; one often forgets that *Caucasian Chalk Circle* was not originally written in English, high praise for any translator. There was an abundance of thought provoking, poetic moments that transpose Brechtian modes of expression into typically English yet innovative aphorisms: lines like 'Terrible is the temptation to do good' and

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‘Even in the bloodiest times there are good people’ stick in the mind.

The play was presented in classic Brechtian style, with the audience always aware that they are watching a spectacle rather than a depiction of reality. The actors were permanently visible at the side of the stage along with all of the crew that were involved. This, taken, together with the sharp, high contrast lighting changes and outbursts of song interspersed throughout the piece, ensured that the audience was always aware of what they were watching through the transparency in staging that it achieved.

The set was relatively sparse for an Oxford Playhouse production, but this allowed the audience to focus on the actors’ craft and ability to convey the moral message of the story. Of note, in the role of Azdak, Luke Rollason managed the difficult task of carrying the humour and controlling the pace of the second act with apparent ease. Likewise, Dominic Applewhite’s versatility in the characters that he played, from grovelling government assistant to bawdy soldier, was extremely impressive. Indeed, the vocal and physical range of the ensemble at large was thoroughly deployed, though Jack Sain’s physicality as the Singer was particularly striking as he stalked around the stage as the master puppeteer, controlling events and observing from afar.

Shadow puppetry, that is the projection of moving shadows onto a white background, whether they be the shadows of the actors themselves or puppets, was also used effectively. These were presumably a nod to the play’s Oriental roots in the ‘Circle of Chalk’ and accompanied the scenes of revolution, allowing the production to imply violence more effectively than would otherwise be possible on stage. The production managed to avoid the often distracting and clumsy effect of stage gore by simply neglecting to show the most violent parts, allowing the audience to

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imagine it much more explicitly than is possible to depict on stage. Two puppets were used to represent Michael in his different phases of life, ingeniously made of quartz, with the gold vein running through it representing his suppressed nobility. The puppets, moving in a way one might expect a human baby to, are a credit to their creator Suzi Battersby.

Caucasian Chalk Circle is a notoriously difficult play to produce. Incorporating many of the traditionally ignored aspects of the play, such as the prologue and the songs, this production pulled them off with enough aplomb to justify their inclusion. Screw the Looking Glass offers a presentation of Brecht's play in a way that reveres his anti-realist traditions while still engaging with its twenty first century audience. Brecht's Twentieth Century update of an ancient parable of human nature and the rise and fall that occurs in a manufactured society serves as a timely, anti-realist reminder in an era marked by the ubiquity of realism in theatre. This production was ultimately successful in its ability to carry the moral message of a play of significant length, some three and a half hours, without the audience ever having their minds wander away from the action. It is a permanently engaging piece with the characteristic that defines all great theatre, the ability to create thought and dialogue through the simple means of entertainment.