

Bertolt Brecht's



A Playgoer's Companion

“epic theatre: a form of didactic drama presenting a series of loosely connected scenes that avoid illusion and often interrupt the story line to address the audience directly with analysis, argument, or documentation.” – *Encyclopedia Britannica*

The Author



Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) was born in Augsburg, Germany. In 1918, while studying medicine at Munich University, he was called up for military service as a medical orderly. During his time in the war he wrote poems and his first play *Baal* (1919). Once the war was over, Brecht moved on into theatre and literature. Working with Erwin Piscator, he solidified his own theories of “epic theatre” and in 1928 wrote *The Threepenny Opera*; It was an overnight success and helped make Brecht famous. In 1933 Brecht fled with his family to Scandinavia and then to America, where he stayed until

1947. Brecht's greatest plays were written while he was away from Germany (1933-1948). They include *The Good Person of Setzuan*, *Galileo*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Brecht received the East German “National Prize” in 1951, and in 1954 he won the international Lenin Peace Prize. He died of a heart attack in 1956, while working on a response to Samuel Beckett's absurdist play *Waiting for Godot*.

Background

Brecht wrote *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in 1944 while living in America. It was initially meant as a Broadway performance but was instead premiered by students of Carleton College in 1948. This play was most likely inspired by Klabund's *Circle of Chalk* which was based on a Chinese play written in 1300 AD. Brecht turned this story into a parable and changed the location of it to Soviet Georgia at the end of the Second World War. The play was first translated into English by Eric Bentley in 1947. Bentley stayed true to the German text with the exception of removing the prologue for the American premiere. This was because at this time Brecht had been forced to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee so he had requested that Bentley postpone the English translation of the prologue until the controversy settled down. The first professional production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* was directed by Bentley and performed at the Hedgerow Theater in Philadelphia in 1948. It did not gain popularity in the United States until the

1950s, though it has since gone on to be considered Brecht's most successful play. *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is an unusual play for Brecht because it has a happy ending, unlike most of his works. It has been attacked as a Communist play, as it is based on the argument that whoever can make best use of the land deserves to use it; it is a parody of the story of King Solomon and how he determined who the rightful mother was.

Prologue

The play begins with two groups of peasants in the ruins of a Caucasian village along with a delegate from the State Reconstruction Commission, shortly after WWII. The peasant group on the right originally owned the valley and herded goats there, and now that war is over they want to return to their valley. The peasant group on the left is a group of fruit farmers from another valley who hope to take over this valley in order to plant fruit trees. The Delegate agrees to listen to both groups' arguments. Ultimately the argument is settled peacefully and the peasants provide a singer. He begins to sing a song called the "Chalk Circle," a tale that derives from Chinese culture. The prologue was first used in the official first production in 1954. It was removed in 1955, in its Frankfurt premier. Ever since, there have been arguments as to whether or not it should be included in the show; a capitalist perspective opposed its inclusion. Some critics say that you truly don't get the real meaning of the show in the absence of the prologue.

Locating the World of the Play

The play is set in Grusinia, a fictionalized version of the Caucasus, a region that bridges Europe and Asia between the Caspian and Black Seas. It is divided by the Caucasian mountain range into two regions: on the southern side 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.



Synopsis

The Caucasian Chalk Circle is actually two stories that come together at the end. The first story is that of Grusha and the second story is that of Azdak. Both stories begin in a Caucasian City ruled by a Governor, who has just had a child, Michael. The Governor's brother stages an insurrection on Easter Sunday. He kills the Governor and forces the Governor's wife, Natella, to flee. In her haste, she leaves the infant Michael behind. The Grand Duke and many of the soldiers flee as well. Grusha, a kitchen maid, engaged to a soldier named Simon, has Michael handed to her during the coup. 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 kidnaping him. 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, the drunken 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. [Research for this document has been adapted from the University of Massachusetts Amherst Theatre Web site, gradesaver.com, and Carol Martin's *Brecht Sourcebook*]

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