

The Caucasian Chalk Circle Bertolt Brecht

This play was written in 1944 whilst Brecht was living in America. He was a man in exile from his own country, having left Hitler's Germany in 1933. Originally the play was intended for Broadway but it never made it there at the time. Instead, it was premiered by students at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota in 1948. The original production omitted the Prologue because at the same time Brecht was forced to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee in Washington in October 1947. This committee was originally created in 1938 to uncover citizens with Nazi ties in the United States, but it concentrated its efforts instead on investigating possible Communist Party infiltration.

The Prologue can be considered to be extremely communist in its message. Any capitalist society would argue that whoever originally owned a piece of land should get it. However, Brecht in his play argues differently – whoever can best use the land should get it. It is because of the communist overtones in the Prologue that it was originally omitted from the production.

Eventually *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* became the favourite Brecht play in America, perhaps because of its happy ending – which was unusual for Brecht. It was not premiered in Germany until 1954 with Brecht's Berliner Ensemble. By this time the Prologue was included in every production. The play has remained one of Brecht's best and most performed plays in the world.

Brecht was not the first to tell the story of the conflict between two mothers competing for the rightful charge of a child. The story is based on the Biblical story of Solomon and the baby. When two women came to Solomon, both of them claiming the same child, in his wisdom he ordered the child to be cut in half. The true mother chose instead to give the whole baby to the other woman, thereby revealing to Solomon that she was in fact the mother. In Brecht's work, the chalk circle is drawn around the child, and the first to pull the child out of the circle wins the child. The story also existed as an ancient Chinese text, and Brecht's fellow German playwright, Klabund, even created an adaptation of this Chinese version. It's interesting to note that Brecht made a crucial change from the Chinese play because in this, it is not the child's birth mother who lets go and wins the custody of the child. Here it would be interesting to discuss why Brecht made this crucial change.

Structure of the play:

In addition to the Prologue there are five scenes or episodes – they are not referred to as acts.

Scene 1: The Noble Child Scene

2: The Flight into the Northern Mountains

Scene 3: In the Northern Mountains

Scene 4: The Story of the Judge

Scene 5: The Caucasian Chalk Circle.

All scenes are self-contained – they don't flow to the next scene nor build up to it. Each scene is like a mini play. Therefore *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is episodic, which means it doesn't happen in chronological order. The story is set in a 'play-within-a-play' structure and this helps to promote the use of Brecht's epic theatre techniques. The play is didactic, which means that it has a moral; it is a story that teaches a lesson. Brecht wanted his plays to have an educational purpose and they were designed to educate both the performers and the audience.

Brecht makes sure that the audience knows this play is didactic through the following:

- Alienation (distancing the audience from the action);
- The episodic nature referred to earlier; and
- The narrator or Singer as he is named in the list of characters.

Brecht used alienation to stop his audience becoming too emotionally involved with the characters. His plays are often referred to as epic theatre, a dramatic form intended to provoke rational thought rather than to create illusion. He wanted to disrupt the notion of the fourth wall (the imaginary wall between the audience and the world of the actor). This often involves the characters directly addressing and acknowledging the audience. We notice that the Singer addresses the audience at the beginning of each scene and tells them exactly what will happen in that scene.

The Prologue sets up the structure of the play. There are two disputing parties, the goat herders and the fruit farmers. Each group wants to claim the valley. However, the goat herders have a claim that they were there first and should therefore keep the land, whereas the fruit farmers argue that they could put the land to better use. The Delegate moderating the debate chooses the fruit farmers because it is more logical for the person who can put the land to better use to get it. He addresses the goat herders thus: 'Comrades, may I report that you all agree to give up the valley?'

There is a strong circularity to the play, with the ending returning to the beginning. Thus the last line of the play, 'The valley to the waterers, that it yields fruit,' is a return to the Prologue where the fruit farmers are given the valley. The Prologue has

allowed Brecht to present his ideas before the real play even starts. This is extremely clever of him because the audience receives the moral of the play without even having to watch it. Thus, he gets his communist message across immediately and only after he has presented the message does he actually allow the play to begin. The story of Grusha and the Chalk Circle only strengthens the moral message found in the Prologue.

Themes:

There are a number of different themes within *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. The obvious one is Communism and Capitalism – referred to earlier when discussing the Prologue. It would be worth discussing this further when considering the story of Grusha and the chalk circle.

The Caucasian Chalk Circle is a political play about the complexities of making decisions, the precarious validity of the law, and humans' behaviour toward their fellows. Bertolt Brecht has the Singer sum up the meaning of the play in the song at the end: Take note what men of old concluded That what there is shall belong to those who are good for it, Children to the maternal, that they prosper; Carts to good drivers, that they are driven well; The valley to the waterers, that it yield fruit. There is the theme of Ownership and Belonging. The questions asked in the play are: Who does the land rightly belong to? Those who have lived there for a length of time, or those who can make good use of it? In the same way the question is asked – Who does the child rightly belong to? The one who gave birth to the child or the one who cared for him and brought him up?

Other themes explored in the play are: ● sacrifice; ● the notion of justice; ● the struggles between the upper class and the lower class. Brecht challenged society's opinion of the oppressed. He tried to teach his audiences not to accept the world as they found it.

Characters:

There is a long list of characters in this play but the central characters are the following

- The Singer – the narrator;
- Grusha – a household maid to the Governor's wife;
- Simon – a soldier;
- Azdak – a judge;
- Shauva – a policeman who becomes Azdak's assistant after Azdak is made judge;
- Natella Abashwili – the Governor's wife.

Two of these central characters are important to the message of the play, namely

Grusha and Azdak. Grusha, the young maid servant, is at the heart of the story and can be described as the main character of the play. She represents the good people in society and some of her character traits are loving and caring, courageous, determined and decisive. Any actress taking on this role must realize that Grusha's character develops from being an immature and naïve girl at the beginning of the play to a responsible young woman at the end. This comes about as a result of the emotional journey she undertakes to protect the child. The actress should use her face, body movements and voice to convey the different emotions her character experiences. Through the character of Grusha, Brecht shows that people who make sacrifices will be rewarded and the tide changes in their favour. Because of her courage and sacrifice, she transforms into the mother of the child and her love for Simon is also rewarded. Azdak was the village 'scrivener' or scribe and was an honest man, except for the times he would be accused of stealing the Fat Prince's rabbits. He is introduced by the Singer at the beginning of scene 4: (GCSE DRAMA \\ © WJEC CBAC Ltd 2016 THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE By Bertolt Brecht). Hear the story of the Judge. How he turned judge, how he passed judgment, what kind of Judge he was. On that Easter Sunday of the great revolt, when the Grand Duke was overthrown and his Governor Avbashwili, father of our child, lost his head, the Village Scrivener Azdak found a fugitive in the woods and hid him in his hut. The fugitive was the Grand Duke himself, and without knowing it Azdak helps him and saves his life. Azdak is upset at being a traitor and repents and goes to seek justice. Instead he ends up becoming a Judge and it is he who decides in favour of Grusha in the chalk circle. Azdak can be considered a trickster figure that turns the law upside down. He, like Grusha, risks his life to make a difference. Through his character and his actions Brecht once again suggests that this is how justice will come. Once again an actor taking on this role has the challenge to show how Azdak develops from a disreputable figure to be the 'wise' judge at the end.

Natella Abashwili is another central character in the play and is a challenge to any actress portraying her. She is the selfish wife of the Governor, who leaves her baby Michael behind, caring more about packing her dresses than saving her child. After the civil war, she tries to get Michael back in order to reclaim the Governor's estates. As a character she is used to highlight some of the major themes in the play, namely justice, family, class warfare and religion. For an actress portraying her, the character traits are selfishness, self-concern, jealousy and meanness. She repeatedly abuses the poor and shows no concern for the less fortunate.

Simon Chavchava is the soldier who falls in love with Grusha and she promises to

marry him when he returns from the war. However she is forced to marry another man, Yussup, before Simon returns. Thanks to Azdak, who mistakenly annuls Grusha's marriage, Simon and Grusha are allowed to marry after all. Simon adopts Michael as his own son.

In accordance with Brechtian techniques, actors will play more than one role. This was frequently used and served to remind the audience that the characters were in fact played by actors in role.

Staging of the play:

When considering ways to stage *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* one must remember Brecht's technical techniques. Where lighting is concerned, Brecht believed in flooding the stage with bright white light the entire time. This was regardless of whether the scene was summer day or winter evening. The stage would be bare. All workings could be seen and any changes to scenery are made in full view of the audience. He would use fragments of scenery and single pieces of furniture to suggest whole locations. The set should be representative rather than realistic. It is possible to use chairs, benches and tables which can be used as themselves, or as building blocks to represent other objects. Often a single item of clothing or prop was all that he used. An actor would frequently change character or costume in front of the audience reinforcing the idea of alienation. Music plays an important part of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and in past productions companies have either composed original music or chosen suitable available music. It would be worth discussing what type of music the learners would consider suitable for this play. In a journal entry of 9 November 1949 Brecht described *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* as one of the 'few real repertoire pieces' by a German author, a play that could be performed at almost any time period because it dealt with general or common themes. Meg Mumford, Bertolt Brecht (Routledge Performance Practitioners, 2009) Indeed the play can be considered to be a timeless parable and it continues to ask urgent questions about justice that can relate to any period, and how to do right when the world goes wrong.