

THE
CAUCASIAN
CHALK
CIRCLE

BY

BERTOLT BRECHT

DIRECTED BY

LIZ DIAMOND

yale
repertory
theatre

WILL POWER!
2014-15 STUDY GUIDE

welcome to **WILLPOWER!**

As part of Yale Repertory Theatre’s educational initiative WILL POWER!, we are pleased to offer this Study Guide to accompany our 2015 production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

Quotes from *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* are taken from the Arcade Publishing edition, translated from the German by James and Tania Stern, with W.H. Auden, and edited by John Willett and Ralph Manheim.

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This guide is yours!
Feel free to keep
notes, doodle, and
write throughout!

SYNOPSIS:

The Caucasian Chalk Circle

The play opens in **Nukha, the capital city of Grusinia**. The **wealthy Governor, Georgi Abashwili**, and his **vain wife, Natella Abashwili**, quibble over the health of their newborn son, **Michael**, while entertaining **Prince Kazbeki**, also known as the **Fat Prince**, who has come to pay respects to the infant. Meanwhile, **the Governor's maid, Grusha Vachnadze**, and **her beloved soldier, Simon Chachava**, share a flirtatious moment at the palace gates. The Fat Prince's visit, however, reveals itself to be cover for a coup to overthrow **the Great Leader**. The Fat Prince and his army of Ironshirts behead the Governor, esteemed agent of the Great Leader, and plunge Nukha into the chaos of revolution. Buildings are set ablaze, riots break out, and the aristocracy flees, including Natella, who takes the time to pack up as much fine clothing as possible but neglects to bring her son with her. Simon is ordered to bring her to safety before joining his battalion on the battlefield. Knowing he will be gone for some time, he proposes marriage to Grusha, who pledges to wait for his return. Simon departs. Amid the commotion at the palace, Grusha ends up with baby Michael in her arms. She reluctantly decides to protect the child and escapes the city, beginning the long journey to her brother's house across the northern mountains.

Grusha encounters many hazards on the road and must use both her wits and her fists to survive. The struggles bond her to Michael, and by the time she arrives at her brother's house, she considers herself his true mother. Grusha spends the winter with her **meek brother Lavrenti**, whose **strict wife Aniko** wants the single mother out of her house. Lavrenti arranges to marry Grusha to a dying man, a plan which will give her legal claim to the child and, since she will become a widow soon enough, allow her to marry Simon after the war. Grusha accepts, but the scheme backfires when she discovers that **the vulgar bridegroom Yussup** has faked his illness. Two years pass, and the unhappiness of Grusha's marriage is mitigated only by the joy of raising Michael. Eventually, the war ends. The Fat Prince is dethroned. Natella returns to the capital. Simon tracks down Grusha and is heartbroken to learn she

has married Yussup. At that moment, the Ironshirts rip Michael out of Grusha's arms with orders to return him to his biological mother. Grusha pursues them to Nukha to plead for custody of Michael.

The play then rewinds to the night the revolution began. Enter **the clerk Azdak**, who, through a strange twist of fortune, had helped the Great Leader flee to safety and was elected Judge in the ensuing political instability. As Judge, Azdak doles out justice as he sees fit. He turns the legal system on its head, accepting bribes and bending laws to help the poor and punish those he considers self-serving. On the day of Grusha's return to the capital, the citizens revolt against Azdak's controversial decisions and beat him black and blue. They prepare to hang the judge, but Azdak is saved by an edict from the Great Leader, who approves of his authority.

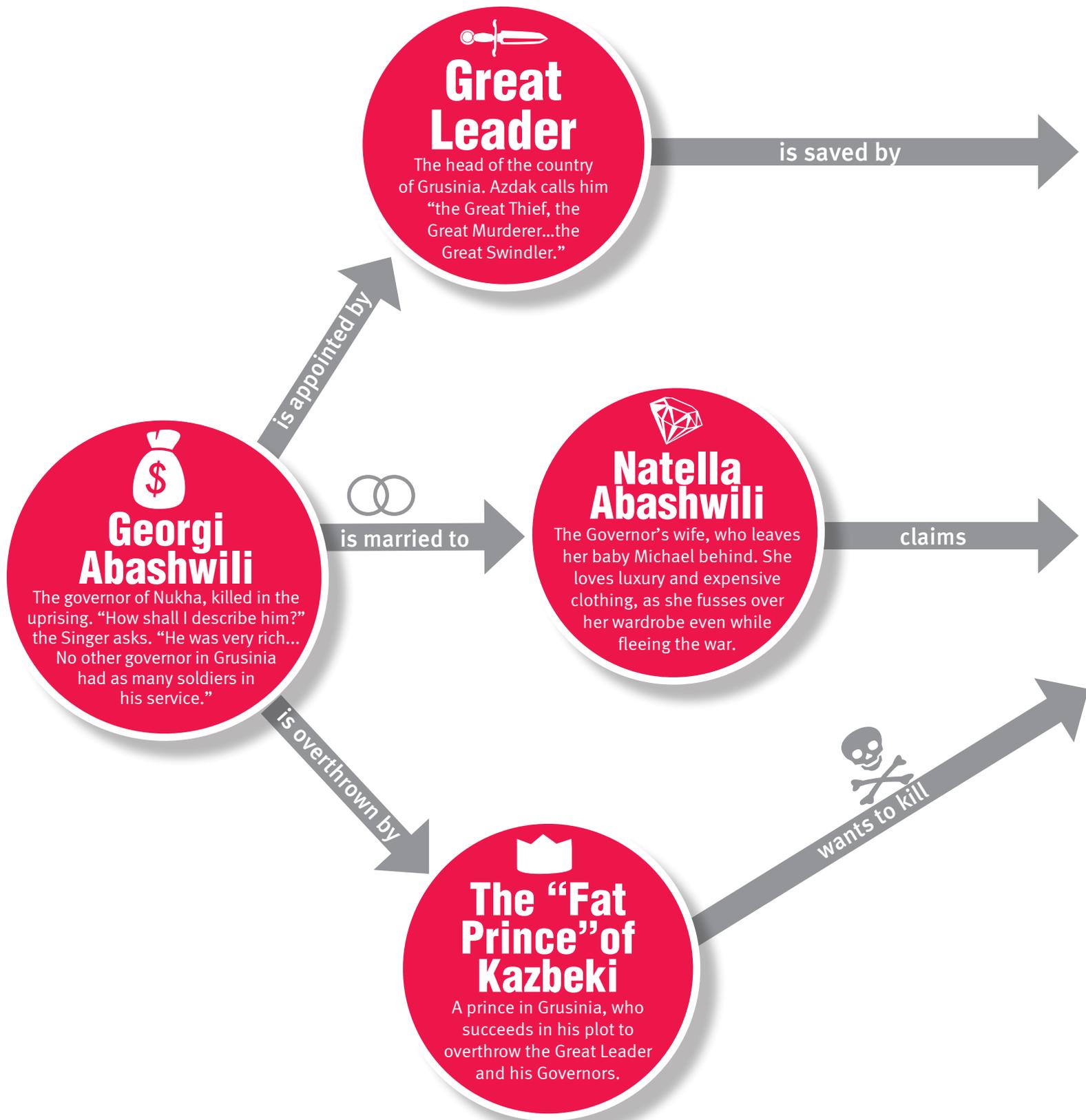
Azdak proceeds to hear the case for custody of Michael. Grusha speaks fiercely for herself, the trial grows tense, and Azdak places the child in the center of a chalk circle. He instructs Grusha and Natella to stand on either side of Michael and to grab one of the boy's arms. Whichever woman pulls the boy to her side of the circle will keep him. The Governor's Wife pulls hard, but, unwilling to cause Michael pain, Grusha lets go. Azdak declares this show of love to be the true sign of motherhood and reunites Grusha with her son. Azdak then dissolves Grusha's marriage to Yussup, leaving her free to marry Simon, who ultimately understands why she took the actions she did. Grusha finally has the family she wanted, and Azdak disappears, relieving himself of the burden of dispensing justice in an unjust world.

**"Change
the world.
It needs it."**

—BERTOLT BRECHT



THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIR



THE GREAT ONES

CLE: Characters



Azdak

A village clerk who becomes Chief Judge in Grusinia, making trouble with his new kind of justice. As the Cook describes him, "He's a drunk and doesn't understand anything...he mixes everything up and the rich can never offer him big enough bribes."



Simon Chachava

A soldier in the palace guard and Grusha's love.

Michael

The Governor's child, abandoned by his family and raised by Grusha.



Grusha Vachnadze

The maid at the Governor's palace who adopts the abandoned baby Michael. She's strong, smart, "healthy as a fish in water." More importantly, she's got a "good soul" and a "kind heart."



Yussup

A peasant who pretends to be sick to avoid joining the army. His aunt marries him off to Grusha, who calls him "Peasant" rather than by his name.



Lavrenti

Grusha's brother. Lavrenti owns a farm in a small town up in the mountains away from the city.



is married to



Aniko

Lavrenti's wife and Grusha's sister-in-law. As Lavrenti says, "She's a good soul—but she's very, very sensitive."

is in love with

is claimed by

must get married to

must live with

the small ones

MAKING THE FAMILIAR

Liz Diamond on Directing *The*



LIZ DIAMOND is a Resident Director at Yale Repertory Theatre and serves as Chair of the Directing Department at Yale School of Drama. Productions at Yale Rep include William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, Lucinda Coxon's *Happy Now?* (also at Primary Stages in New York), Marcus Gardley's *dance of the holy ghosts*, Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, Sunil Kuruvilla's *Fighting Words* and *Rice Boy*, Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy*, Brecht's *St. Joan of the Stockyards*, and the premieres of *The America Play* and *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* by Suzan-Lori Parks. She has directed new plays and classical works at theatres including the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, American Repertory Theater, The Public Theater, Vineyard Theatre, and Theatre for a New Audience, and has won the OBIE and the Connecticut Critics Circle Awards for Outstanding Direction. Liz serves on the Board of the Yale Cabaret and is a Visiting Professor at the Shanghai Theatre Academy in China. She lives in New York City with her husband, Ralph Chipman, and daughter, Hannah.

A director starts her work on a production long before she starts shaping actors' performances in the rehearsal room—often before those actors are even cast in the play! She must carefully plan every aspect of the production and collaborate with a team of artists to execute a vision. The director will work with a dramaturg to research the text and understand the historical background of the play. She will work with designers to dream up a physical world for the stage. She will make many decisions—big and small—on the way to opening night.

Liz Diamond, the director of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, has been imagining her production for well over a year. She sat down with Yale Rep's Literary Manager Amy Boratko last fall to discuss her thoughts on the play, Bertolt Brecht, and what she envisions seeing on stage this spring.

AMY BORATKO: *You've directed many other Brecht plays in your career, and you also teach his plays and theories to your students at Yale School of Drama. What attracts you to his work?*

LIZ DIAMOND: I love Brecht's plays because, in them, I hear the voice of an artist speaking directly to me about why theatre is important. As a kid, I fell in love with theatre because I loved play-acting, making stuff up. I got to pretend to be people unlike myself onstage. But, as I grew up, I worried: was theatre important? Who cares about it? We've got movies and sporting events. People will pay a hundred dollars to see a concert, but will they go to the theatre? When I began to read Brecht's plays and his essays about theatre, I began to see theatre the way he did—as a place that invites people to reconsider the way they think and feel about their lives and the way society works.

STRANGE:

Caucasian Chalk Circle

AB: Brecht wrote a lot about how and why he thought theatre could make an impact—and promote social justice. How would you describe his theories?

LD: Brecht’s most famous idea is something he called the *verfremdungseffekt* (a word that is sometimes translated as the “alienation effect” by scholars). Brecht believed that the theatre can actually make people see how something very familiar to them—the way a boy and girl flirt, for example, or the way a person fishes for change in her pocket to pay for something—is shaped by, and reflects, the world they live in, the social and economic pressures they are forced to live under. The theatre has the power, Brecht believed, to make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar.

AB: Can you give me an example of this?

LD: In *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, an old farmer angrily overcharges Grusha when she wants to buy a little milk for the baby she has rescued from the war-torn city. We react to the farmer, at first, as a type of person we think we know very well: a stingy, selfish person who has no heart. We judge him harshly. What a rat he is not to give poor Grusha some milk for her baby! Why does he charge her such an outrageous price? Then he complains that soldiers have stolen all his sheep and killed his cows. Suddenly we see his miserliness, his meanness, in a new light. This old farmer is not a guy who was born stingy; he’s a guy who has lost his means of making a living. He is starving, too. He can’t afford to be charitable to Grusha and her baby, and he is ashamed. And his shame makes him angry. Brecht hoped that if the audience could see this, we might begin to understand that there is something wrong with a world in which charity is a luxury so few can afford—and we might try to change it.

Brecht’s theatre makes us stop, notice, and critically challenge our own assumptions about why the world is the way it is. Brecht lived in a time when he saw his world torn apart by Nazism. He saw too many of his fellow citizens put their heads down, put their collars up, and ignore what was happening around them. He

felt that the most important thing a human can do is to question our assumptions about the way things are. To pay attention, to notice, and to ask *why*. Brecht did not believe that “Fate” shapes the world; he believed that we human beings do—and, therefore, that we can change it, but only if we make the effort to understand how it works.

AB: How did you come to work on this production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*?

LD: I first approached Yale Rep’s Artistic Director James Bundy. I’m a Resident Director at Yale Rep, so it’s a responsibility—and a privilege—to generate ideas about productions for the theatre. Theatre directors spend a lot of time looking for projects that excite them, that they think might excite a group of actors and designers, and that might eventually move an audience. Directors look for plays that stir something inside them, something they need to express, to share.

Many years ago I read Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. I want to do this play now because it is about how brutally hard it is for a person to act morally, to do the right thing in a society that is constructed around the idea that there can only be winners and losers. And because it’s about how rare true justice is.

“Terrible is the temptation to do good!”

—FROM *THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE*



Continued: Liz Diamond on Directing *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*

AB: Can you tell us about what happens in the play?

LD: Grusha is a servant girl in the palace of a governor who is deposed in a violent coup at the start of the play. As the palace burns, everyone flees, and the Governor's baby is abandoned. Grusha finds him. She has no reason to care for him. But, something inside her tells her to take him, to help him, and she does. Eventually she falls in love with that baby; her needs and the baby's become one, and, instead of giving him away as soon as she can, she keeps him, and cares for him. When the war ends, soldiers come to take the baby away and return him to his "true" mother, the one who abandoned him, the ex-Governor's wife. Grusha is devastated but follows them back to the city to try to fight for the right to keep the child.

Now Brecht turns the clock back to the day of the coup, and we meet Azdak, a drunken poet who helps refugees fleeing the city. When he finds out that one of the people he has helped is the deposed dictator, a mass murderer; Azdak is afraid he'll be hanged and turns himself into the police, who, instead of punishing him, make him a judge, since the old one has been hanged! Azdak tries cases in which no one is innocent; everyone is trying to win something, so he just fines whoever is richest, takes a cut, and gives the rest to whoever is poorest. When the war is over and the brutal dictator is back in power, Azdak is condemned to death, but he is rescued at the last minute by the dictator, as a

reward for saving his life! Azdak now has lost all faith in people. He no longer believes in goodness, or justice, just survival. So when Grusha shows up in his court to fight for the child, Azdak refuses to believe that this woman is for real—that goodness exists.

AB: Which motivates him to test her.

LD: The Chalk Circle Test is one of the greatest scenes of the twentieth-century theatre. It's the collision between a despairing idealist, a man who has lost his faith in human beings and himself, and a young, stubborn, tough, but completely clear-thinking young woman who has suffered through a terrible ordeal and through it has come to understand that the only way to live is to cultivate compassion.

AB: One of the incredible things about Brecht's play is that, with this dramatic and serious premise, he still entertains his audiences with spectacle, action, and humor.

LD: Brecht is a great playwright because he's great at imaging a whole production. In his plays, there is wonderful dialogue but also a lot of amazing physical action. Grusha crosses a dangerous chasm in a glacier onstage and fights off brutal soldiers. *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is filled with the kind of storytelling that you might see in a cartoon, or in a movie, where you could turn the sound off and understand what's happening.



And, the play is funny. It really, really is. At one point Grusha is married off by a monk to a dying man, and the drunken monk combines a funeral and wedding ceremony. If we're doing it right, we'll laugh a lot in rehearsal.

AB: *You'll be casting actors for the production in November. What sort of actors are you looking for?*

LD: Brecht once said that greatest actors are “character actors.” The actors Brecht loved had features that were quite distinct and unusual. Maybe the actor's nose was impressively large or her smile was big and a bit crooked. Or he had bushy, expressive eyebrows or an unusually rough voice. One of Brecht's favorite actors was Charlie Chaplin. He adored the way that Chaplin used gestures and movement to reveal his character's feelings. Brecht encouraged actors to express themselves physically, to use slapstick, and to play with exaggeration. The actors I need for this show are like that—unafraid to be foolish, physically fearless, inventive, and a little bit strange!

A composer and choreographer will be working on the production with me. Some of the songs are heartbreaking—ballads that might bring tears to your eyes—and others are extremely funny. I want actors who can carry a tune but whose voices are somehow unique. I'm not looking to find a bunch of pretty voices. I want an array of really interesting people on stage.

AB: *What will your production look like?*

LD: I'm working with a wonderful team of designers and collaborators. As I was working on the production this summer, I couldn't escape images of the latest eruption of violence in Israel and Palestine, the unfolding disaster in Syria, and the crisis in the Ukraine. People who live just like us, who send their kids to school, watch TV, and send text messages, were having their homes blown to smithereens by drone strikes and missiles. People like us were picking their way through the ruins, refugees carrying home stereos on the backs of donkeys because their cars had been blown up. Grusha will look like a modern woman in a war zone. The soldiers might look a bit like the special forces and rebels we see in the news. The rich will wear the kinds of clothes that rich people flaunt in this country and all over the world. That means lots of bling! The production will have images that are recognizable from our own lives and what we see in the media. But—there should also be something exciting, visually arresting for you to look at, something that makes the familiar strange. We'll be making theatre, not everyday life.

FROM THE LEFT: REGGIE MONTGOMERY AND MICHAEL POTTS IN *THE AMERICA PLAY*, 1993; PHOTO BY T. CHARLES ERICKSON. MEG BROGAN, JAYNE HOUDYSHELL, AND EMMA BOWERS IN *FIGHTING WORDS*, 2002; LA TONYA BORSAY, PASCALE ARMAND, BRIAN TYREE HENRY, AND HARRIETT D. FOY IN *DANCE OF THE HOLY GHOSTS*, 2006; THE CAST OF *THE WINTER'S TALE*, 2012; PHOTOS BY JOAN MARCUS.



Where's Bertolt?

Throughout his life, Bertolt Brecht was outspoken in politics. The early 20th century saw the clash of many competing ideals and forms of government. Colonies in Asia and Africa were struggling to throw off their European conquerors; Europeans were themselves struggling to deal with the aftermath of the First World War. And some governments began to adopt radical new policies in the name of Fascism or Communism. Brecht believed that artists should react to the politics of their times and speak their own beliefs aloud in fiery language in their art.

—DAVID CLAUSON.

1898

Bertolt Brecht is born in the city of **Augsburg** in Bavaria, Germany.

1916–17

Brecht avoids entering the army in **World War I** by enrolling at the University of Munich, where he studies science and medicine.



STORMTROOPERS ADVANCING UNDER GAS, 1924. THIS ETCHING BY OTTO DIX SHOWS A DISTORTED IMAGE OF **TRENCH WARFARE**.

1918

Brecht returns to Augsburg and works in a military hospital and sees the horrors of World War I firsthand—including bodies bloated and choked by poison gas. In Augsburg, he writes his first play, *Baal*. The plot follows a young poet whose personal vices lead to his destruction. With its dark tone and distorted, nonrealistic world, *Baal* is often called an **Expressionist** play. Expressionism was a German movement in painting, sculpture, theatre, and cinema early in the 20th century. Expressionist artists found that realistic reporting of “the events” could not capture the true horror and darkness of war and death, so they instead turned to myth and artful exaggeration.

1924

Brecht moves to Berlin, Germany’s capital city, and befriends many artists and directors. He reads the works of **Karl Marx**, the first philosopher of **Communism**. Communism, a political system based upon communal ownership of all property, was the official state ideology of the Soviet Union between 1917 and 1990.

In Berlin, Brecht writes plays and musicals that push for political change and challenge audiences to lead moral lives. Because of his political beliefs, the Nazi party, which was gaining power at the time, singles out Brecht as one of their enemies.



THE HAMMER AND SICKLE WAS A COMMUNIST SYMBOL.



GERMAN CHANCELLOR **ADOLF HITLER** SPEAKS TO NAZI OFFICIALS, 1939. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

1933

When the **Nazi party** takes power and **Adolf Hitler** becomes chancellor of Germany, Brecht and his family (his wife, actress Helene Weigel; his son Stefan; and his daughter Barbara) leave Berlin fearing for their lives. The playwright stays one step ahead of the German army’s invasion of Eastern

Europe. He flees to Vienna, then to Prague, then to Paris. Finally, he settles down for six years in the Danish town of Svendborg. Sometimes he visits friends in London, New York, Moscow, and Copenhagen.

1939

The German army invades Poland and begins **World War II**. Brecht applies to move to America but must wait for some time in Helsinki and Stockholm first.

1941

Brecht finally gets his chance to move to America and settles in California, like many other German artists in exile. There, he writes many successful plays, including *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *The Life of Galileo*, and *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*. Many of these plays take place during a time of conflict and have strong political and moral messages. Brecht also writes a Hollywood movie in 1943. In 1945, World War II ends, but Brecht decides to stay in California.

1947

The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), a subcommittee in the US Congress headed by Senator Joseph McCarthy, investigates Hollywood filmmakers who have Communist associations. Brecht is put under investigation. Many of his fellow writers are blacklisted (stopped from working) in the movie industry, but Brecht is not punished. He decides to return to Germany.



BRECHT TESTIFYING BEFORE HUAC.

1947–1956

Germany is divided in two parts after the end of World War II. The western half is allied with Britain, France, and the US. The eastern half, where Brecht settles, is allied with the Soviet Union. (By 1961, the Berlin Wall, which separated West Berlin, an enclave allied with the West, from East Berlin, the *de facto* capital of East Germany, became an important symbolic boundary.) Brecht founds a theatre company, the Berliner Ensemble. He writes very few plays (mostly adaptations and short operas). However, he writes many poems.



THE BERLIN WALL, BUILT IN 1961, WAS THE SYMBOL OF THE DIVIDE BETWEEN EAST AND WEST GERMANY. PHOTO BY THIERRY NOIR, 1986.

1956 Brecht dies of a heart attack.

Sources For *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*

Where did Brecht get the ideas for his plays? In the case of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, it came from a play that Brecht saw in Berlin: Li Qianfu's medieval Chinese play *The Circle of Chalk* in an adaptation by the German poet Klabund. Klabund was an experimental author who was fascinated with the legends of the Middle East and Asia, writing novels like *Mohammed* (1917) and translating many poems from the East, which he published in 1924. Brecht first learned about Klabund's work in Berlin in the 1920s. A decade later, he would learn about Chinese acting styles from the German residency of the famous actor Mei Lanfang. Plays like *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *The Good Person of Szechuan* are the result of Brecht's Asian inspiration. This chart will help you see the connection among these three works.

—DAVID CLAUSON

	WHEN AND WHERE WAS IT WRITTEN?	WHERE AND WHEN IS IT SET?	WHO'S OUR MAIN CHARACTER?	HER RELATIONSHIP TO THE CHILD?
 <p>LI QIANFU'S PLAY <i>The Circle of Chalk</i></p>	China, either the 13th or 14th century C.E.	Medieval China	Haitang, a woman who must become the second wife to the wealthy Mr. Ma when her father goes bankrupt and commits suicide	Biological
 <p>KLABUND'S PLAY <i>The Circle of Chalk</i></p>	Germany, 1924		Same as Qianfu's original (above), but Haitang is first sold to be a singer and prostitute in a teahouse	
 <p>BRECHT'S PLAY <i>The Caucasian Chalk Circle</i></p>	1944, when Brecht was in exile in the US	The Caucasus region south of Russia, time undetermined	Grusha, a hardworking maid in the palace of the governor of Nukha. However, Azdak, the lowly village clerk turned Grand Judge, becomes a second main character in the final two acts.	Adopted

Asian Chalk Circle

WHAT CRISIS SPARKS THE HERO'S JOURNEY?

The first Mrs. Ma poisons her husband but blames Haitang, who has to flee to escape punishment.

A revolution occurs! The Governor is overthrown, Prince Kazbeki and his troops take power, and things get very dangerous for Grusha.

WHAT AWFUL THING HAPPENS NEXT?

The murder case is brought to a corrupt local judge. He takes a bribe from Mrs. Ma and sentences Haitang to death, but she's saved at the last minute by the intervention of her brother.

Grusha must flee to the countryside and protect the child as she endures grueling physical obstacles.

WHO IS THE FINAL JUDGE?

Bao Zheng, a real historical judge from the Song dynasty, a symbol of good justice.

The Emperor of China

Azduk, a drunken village clerk who is made Chief Judge by accident.

HOW DOES IT END?

Justice is served and the child is taken from the evil Mrs. Ma and given to Haitang, who inherits her husband's fortune.

The Emperor falls in love with and marries Haitang. *(Note: This behavior would have been unthinkable for a Chinese emperor in Qianfu's day.)*

Azduk awards Grusha the child and divorces her from the abusive Yussup. She is now free to marry her love, Simon Chachava.

HOW IS THE STORY TOLD?

Through narration, song, and acting.

These were all typical aspects of theatre in Qianfu's time.

Klabund was an experimental playwright who did not want his play to seem too realistic.

Brecht saw all of these as ways to get the message of his plays through to an audience.

This. Is. EPIC.



Bertolt Brecht created theatre to inspire social change. Influenced by the writings of Karl Marx, the German philosopher and co-author of the *Communist Manifesto*, Brecht believed that if the workers and the poor could understand how the rich oppressed and exploited them, the lower classes could use that knowledge to change the world—to demand higher wages and better working conditions, to stop wars, and to protect their rights. To help educate his audience, Brecht created a theatre where they could examine the events on stage like scientists conducting an experiment. Brecht even called his work “the theatre for the scientific age”!

Brecht wanted his audience to consider the results of every event on stage with the cool objectivity of a scientist. You can think of Brecht’s theatre as a laboratory of human choice. In every scene, the characters must choose what to do in their given circumstances. For instance, in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Grusha must choose whether to take the baby Michael or leave him at the palace. Later in the play, Azdak must choose whether Michael should be with Grusha, who has cared for him, or his biological mother, Natella, who abandoned him.

Brecht revolutionized the theatre by insisting that the audience’s most important task is to think. Prior to Brecht, people often attended the theatre to feel. They wanted to laugh and cry with the actors on stage. Brecht called this the “Dramatic Theatre.” The dramatic theatre relies on the illusion that the events taking place on stage were happening just as they would in real life. Brecht, on the contrary, did not want to trick the audience into mistaking theatre for reality. He wanted the audience to know that they were watching a play. Brecht called his way of writing and directing the “Epic Theatre.” “The essential point of the epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to feelings than to the spectator’s reason,” he wrote in 1927. The epic theatre encourages the audience to think about how the events in the play might have turned out differently. In the chart to the right, Brecht compared the dramatic theatre and the epic theatre.

“Epic Theatre is an extremely artistic affair hardly thinkable without artists of virtuosity, imagination, humor and fellow-feeling.”

ABOVE: THE CAST OF AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER’S PRODUCTION OF *THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE*, DIRECTED BY JOHN DOYLE AND FEATURING ORIGINAL MUSIC BY NATHANIEL STOOKEY. PHOTO BY KEVIN BERNE, 2010.



DRAMATIC THEATRE EPIC THEATRE

Plot

Implicates the spectator in a stage situation, wears down the spectator's capacity for action

Provides the spectator with sensations

Experience

The spectator is involved in something.

Suggestion

Instinctive feelings are preserved.

The spectator is in the thick of it, shares the experience.

The human being is taken for granted.

He is unalterable.

Eyes on the finish

One scene makes another

Growth

Linear development

Evolutionary determinism

Man as a fixed point

Thought determines being.

Feeling

Narrative

Turns the spectator into an observer, but arouses the spectator's capacity for action

Forces the spectator to make decisions

Picture of the world

The spectator is made to face something.

Argument

Brought to the point of recognition

The spectator stands outside, studies.

The human being is the object of the inquiry.

He is alterable and able to alter.

Eyes on the course

Each scene for itself

Montage

In curves

Jumps

Man as a process

Social being determines thought.

Reason

Continued: This. Is. EPIC.

The epic theatre uses what Brecht called *verfremdungseffekt*, or the “alienation effect,” which makes familiar things appear strange, and helps the audience look at the play as an object of study and better understand the human condition—and the ways it can be altered. The alienation effect is crucial for the epic theatre, because, like all good experiments, it makes us ask: why? In *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, why is it that the poor are killed in the war while the powerful become rich? Why must Grusha risk her life to save a child? Why does Natella want her son Michael back?



ABOVE: LOTTE LENYA PERFORMS AS JENNY DIVER IN *THE THREEPENNY OPERA* AT THE THEATER de LYS, 1954. PHOTO BY S. NEIL FUJITA.
OPPOSITE PAGE: CLIFTON DUNCAN, EPHRAIM BIRNEY, PAUL JUHN, BROOKE ISHIBASHI, JACK ALLEN GREENFIELD, AND TAYLOR MAC IN *GOOD PERSON OF SZECHWAN* AT THE PUBLIC THEATER. PHOTO BY CAROL ROSEGG, 2013.

The alienation effect shows up in all the elements of Brecht’s theatre, for example:

ACTING

Brecht wanted actors to represent the actions of their character, not become their character. He wanted actors to show the audience what happened and not become overwhelmed by their emotions.

EPISODES

Brecht structures his plays with episodic scenes, so that each one could stand as its own separate mini-play. Episodes also stop and start the action, so that the spectator has time to think about what just occurred. They also help remind the audience that they are watching a play and not an event from real life.

SCENE TITLES

Brecht often titled individual scenes and projected these titles on the stage. Sometimes the scene titles indicated what would happen in the scene, so that the spectator could concentrate on how and why things happened instead of being held in suspense about what was going to happen.

SINGING AND MUSIC

The songs and music in Brecht’s plays often comment on the action, as opposed to tugging at the heart. The tone of Brecht’s song might be at odds with the content of the lyrics. For example, a joyful, rousing melody will accompany lyrics about poverty. When singing, actors should not disguise that they have changed from speaking to singing as if this happens every day. As Brecht says, “nothing is more revolting than when the actor pretends not to notice that he has left the level of plain speech and started to sing.”

—DAVID E. BRUIN



**“In the dark times
will there also be
singing? Yes, there will
also be singing. About
the dark times.”**



Play It Again, Bertolt: Music and Brecht's Epic Theatre

In his day, Bertolt Brecht ushered in radical changes to many aspects of the theatre, including the way music was used during a play. Brecht recognized music's entertainment value and its potential to stir human emotion, so he found ways to harness that power in alignment with his epic theatre. He filled his plays with songs but most often placed them between scenes, set apart from the dialogue, instructing actors to make a conscious shift from speaking to singing mode, allowing the music to contribute to the episodic structure of his plays. Additionally, Brecht worked with composers to create stark contrasts between text and music. Jaunty melodies often underscored depressing lyrics, and songs that expressed particularly heartbreaking emotions featured rather dispassionate

musical accompaniment. These intentional contradictions prevented spectators from being moved by the music beyond the point of critical examination, without doing away with the allure of music itself.

In Brecht's plays, songs form a patchwork of musical interludes, during which the audience can reflect upon the characters' choices and the action of the story. His lyrics probe questions of humanity: the words sung are, according to Brecht, "a means of conveying particular attitudes adopted by the speaker towards other men." These techniques differ from, for example, the American musical, in which characters frequently "break into song" mid-scene, often singing what would be dialogue or soliloquy just as naturally as if they were speaking

it. The music increases the emotional impact and bonds the audience to the characters. In other words, on Broadway, the goal is often to draw the viewer deeper into a play with each song; for Brecht, each song becomes an opportunity to keep her at arm's length. His goal, to be sure, was not to remove the pleasure of music from the theatre, nor was it to forbid emotional connections between an audience and his characters. Brecht, in fact, sometimes broke his own "rules" to capitalize on an exciting theatrical moment or to drive home a particularly gut-wrenching idea. What matters most is that he treated music as an entry to a special realm of experience, where the hearts of his audience members were forced to work in tandem with their heads.

—BENJAMIN FAINSTEIN

The Caucasian Chalk Circle features many songs, and Brecht uses music in diverse ways. At times, characters finish scenes with songs that both express how they feel and point to the social problems that led them to their current state (think of Grusha singing to baby Michael). Other times, the Singer moves the plot along by narrating musically, keeping the storytelling style in the epic mode. And at still other times, the Singer interrupts a scene to sing a thoughtful tune about the implications of living in a world of uneasy justice and complicated choices.

Given what you have read about Brecht's original theories about the use of music in the theatre and his positive attitude towards reinvention and breaking rules, what do you think about the use of music in Yale Repertory Theatre's production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*? What role did the music play in your experience? How did director Liz Diamond and composer David Lang align with Brecht's ideas from the mid-20th century—and how did they depart from them to create a unique theatrical experience for contemporary times?

5 Totally Unexpected Things Brecht and Video Games Have in Common

Long before the Xbox was introduced—long before the Super Nintendo was even dreamed of—playwright Bertolt Brecht tried to create a new kind of entertainment that would engage and inspire people. This theatre would be like the boxing matches or music shows that were so popular in the Germany of Brecht’s day. It would, he hoped, be something that masses of people could enjoy, but also something that would ask an audience to do more than simply sit back and watch.

Although he never lived to hold a controller or connect to the Internet, Brecht would probably be impressed by how video games have matured into a real art form. Games today have massive worlds to explore, huge casts of characters, exciting mental challenges, and plots full of twists and turns. Even though theatre and video games are very different, especially in that video games allow the player to control and direct action in a way that few theatre pieces do, some of today’s most popular games share a kinship with Brecht’s ideas that might surprise you.

—DAVID CLAUSON

1. A series of choice and consequences



Video games rely on choices: do I go left or right? Do I fight or run away? Where do I build this building? When we play a game, we make a series of choices, and then we see how our choices have affected the outcome. Did I win or lose? Are things better or worse?

Bioshock and *Bioshock 2* make moral choice a key part of the game. Players must choose either to save children from parasites that are harvesting their life force, or to use the parasites to harvest their life force for themselves. One choice is selfish, even evil, but makes the player more powerful. Players’ choices affect not only progress through the game but also its ending sequence. A good ending results if the player has chosen to save all of the children, and a bad one if the player has followed the selfish path.

In *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, the audience watches how Grusha’s choices lead her to survive in tough times and the effect Azdak’s choices have on the nation of Grusinia.

2. “Epic Mode”



Brecht’s plays jump quickly from one scene and point in time to another. In *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, the scene shifts abruptly from palace to countryside, then to hills, to glacier, to valley. Short cuts like these rely on context clues, music, movement, film projections, and song to show the audience what has changed. This writing strategy is called “episodic.” Brecht’s plays also span continents and feature huge casts of characters. All of these things combined make Brecht’s theatre “epic.”

Classic adventure titles like *Super Mario World* and *Crash Bandicoot* move the player from level to level quickly, leaving a big gap of time and space between each. In these games, the levels of play are like the scenes in a Brecht play. Other series, from *The Elder Scrolls* to the *Katamari* games, have an epic feel. They’re long odysseys that span detailed fictional worlds.

SUPER MARIO WORLD BY NES/NINTENDO CO. LTD.; ASSASSIN’S CREED BY UBISOFT, SA; SIMCITY BY ELECTRONIC ARTS, INC.



3. Trying on different points of view



Many video games allow the player to switch perspectives. We can compare one avatar (the playable character who responds to the player's controls) to others with different stories, abilities, and weaknesses. In the gritty *Assassin's Creed* games, the main character Desmond uses technology to inhabit the personas of different assassins throughout history. Although *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* has a much lighter tone, it also encourages the player to take on different characters. Part of the fun of these games is seeing how very different people and points of view relate to or compare to each other.

In a Brecht play, the audience can't control the characters' actions—the script and director do that. However, Brechtian theatre encourages us to “try on” new perspectives and to follow different characters through the story. For example, in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, we follow Grusha for the first part of the storyline but then suddenly switch perspective and see through Azdak's eyes.

“Society cannot share a common system of communication so long as it is split into warring factions.”



4. A laboratory for real life



Brecht saw the theatre as a laboratory for experiments in politics and society. To him, plays weren't simple entertainment, but could be a productive way to imagine new ways of building things or interacting with each other as humans. In the hit game *Minecraft*, the player can use the entire game world as a playground for testing out buildings, structures, materials, and machines. *SimCity* and the *Civilization* series are based on the premise that a player can build a better society, using the real world outside the game as a starting point for exploration.

5. An experience for everyone



Brecht wanted people to be excited to come to the theatre. He used music and spectacular effects to keep his plays interesting and fun, and he made stories everybody could understand. Brecht's plays often have complex plotlines with many subplots and sudden changes of fortune. Performances will often use many methods—like clear stagecraft and helpful visual and auditory aids like film projections and song—to keep the story understandable.

In gaming terms, these effects are like the tutorial that takes place early in the story. Neither plays nor video games require a lot of knowledge or training to engage with and enjoy them. Rather, you are supposed to be able to dive in, then learn and grow as you go along.

Finding Justice in an U

Linking *The Caucasian Chalk C*

Brecht found inspiration for his work in the current events of his day, and then he would take issues, questions, and themes from the world around him and fold them into his plays. If Brecht were reading today's headlines, what might he find intriguing? What stories would capture his attention? In the article below, the author Jennifer Schmidt draws comparisons between Brecht's character of Grusha and the recent Nobel Peace Prize Winner Malala Yousafzai.

In his writings about *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Bertolt Brecht explains that the American slang word “sucker” is an apt description of Grusha at the beginning of the play. By protecting the child, Michael, Grusha continually threatens her own safety and sacrifices the possibility of finding happiness with the man she loves. There are points at which Grusha considers giving up her responsibility for Michael, and Brecht wants the audience to understand Grusha's hesitation as a sign of her reason and prudence. By the end of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, however, Grusha is no longer a sucker, because she fully understands the sacrifices required of her and still desires the responsibility of caring for Michael. In other words, she has become a mother.

Brecht wrote *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* at the end of World War II, and he uses Grusha's story as a way to comment on the difficulty of making moral decisions during a time of war. Through the character of Grusha, Brecht demonstrates how the conditions of war and poverty make a sucker out of anyone who tries to act selflessly or heroically. Grusha's journey from maid to mother serves as a lesson, illustrating the difficulty of distinguishing between right and wrong in matters of life and death.

Brecht intended for this lesson to apply not just to the global crisis of his own time, but also to the political and economic crises of any time and place. For instance, this year, Malala Yousafzai became the youngest person in history to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Like Grusha, Malala put herself at enormous risk in order to fight for the rights of children. When the Taliban began closing schools in Malala's home in Pakistan's Swat Valley, the safe choice would have been to remain silent. Instead Malala spoke out for the right to education for all girls, and in 2012, at the age of 15, she was shot in the head by Taliban militants. After surviving the gunshot wound, Malala broadened her campaign to further girls' education.

Speaking out for education and peace is an unquestionably just cause, as is Grusha rescuing an abandoned baby. But not every one sees Malala's story as a heroic one. Her position as a public figure means her story and her cause are open to hostile or radical interpretations. As quickly as her sacrifices are applauded, others label her an “unwitting pawn.” In a story from October 10, 2014, *The New York Times* commented on the varied reactions to Malala's struggles in different parts of the world:

Yet since that decisive gunshot in October 2012, Ms. Yousafzai and her compelling story have been reshaped by a range of powerful forces—often, though not always, for good—in ways that have left her straddling perilous fault lines of culture, politics and religion.

In Pakistan, conservatives assailed the schoolgirl as an unwitting pawn in an American-led assault. In the West, she came to embody the excesses of violent Islam, or was recruited by campaigners to raise money and awareness for their causes. Ms. Yousafzai, guided by her father and a public relations team, helped to transform that image herself, co-writing a best-selling memoir. And now the Nobel Prize committee has provided a fresh twist on her story recasting her as an envoy for South Asian peace.

Unjust World: Circle to Current Events

Thinking about Malala's story in relation to *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, raises many questions. What does it mean that those who advocate for children's rights must make such extreme sacrifices to their own safety? Is fighting for the powerless and underprivileged always the job for a "sucker"? Malala herself has spoken about the task of advocating for the weak and powerless. An article in *The Guardian* from October 10, 2014, quotes the speech she gave in response to the news of her Nobel Peace Prize:

"Through my story I want to tell other children all around the world, they should stand up for their rights.

"They should not wait for someone else, their voices are more powerful.

"It would seem they are weak but at a time when no one speaks, your voice gets so loud and everyone has to listen to it. Everyone has to hear.

"This award is for all those children who are voiceless, whose voices need to be heard. I speak for them and I stand up with them. And I join them in their campaign that their voices should be heard, and they have rights."

Malala's bravery and eloquence make it clear that she's no sucker. What the comparison with Brecht's play illuminates, however, is that while her actions are good and her cause is just, the world is unjust. For both Malala and Grusha the road to "justice" is incredibly challenging. They may gain success and rewards, but their stories serve to highlight the injustices of a world filled with poverty, oppression, and war.

—JENNIFER SCHMIDT



Before

1. Several of the articles in this guide discuss Brecht's idea of *verfremdungseffekt*, often translated as “alienation effect” or as “making the familiar strange.” Over the course of a day, become an observer and try to view everyday actions—ones you often overlook or take for granted—with a new perspective. Pick one event and write two paragraphs about the central “character” of your observation: one describing the person's actions using your past assumptions and one in which you try to describe the same action in a new way.
2. Jennifer Schmidt's article “Finding Justice in an Unjust World” compares and contrasts recent Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai to Grusha from *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Read today's newspaper, and find a story about your community, or the contemporary world, that is very complex. Think of situations that have no clear “right” or “wrong” or that deal with many complicated, opposing viewpoints. Based on the article or articles you find, outline the issue: what is at stake for each side, and how does each side see the other? If you were a playwright like Bertolt Brecht, what are the ways you'd try to tell this story on stage? What is the main conflict, and how could you show an audience both sides of the stories?
3. In Brecht's plays, characters often have to make difficult choices—ones in which any decision can cause struggle or strife. What is the hardest choice you've made in your life? Write about the factors that went into making your decision, and how you had to weigh the potential outcome of all possibilities. What consequences did the choice you made have on your life, and how did it change how you viewed yourself or others around you?

After

1. In the interview with Liz Diamond, she discusses how “the production will have images that are recognizable from our own lives and what we see in the media.” What aspects of the production—or moments—felt familiar to you? How did that affect the way you watched the story? What elements of the production felt strange or different to you?
2. In his article, production dramaturg David Clauson compares elements of Brecht's plays to elements of video games. Now that you've seen *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, what specific comparisons can you make between the play and your favorite game? If you were to create a game based on Brecht's play, what would it look like? What would the focus of the game be, and what goals would the character try to achieve?
3. The article “This. Is. EPIC.” describes Brecht's theories on theatre and how he hoped to incite social change through art. Think about the production you just saw: when were you swept up by the action, story, and emotion of the tale? When were you able to sit back and think critically about what was happening on stage—or make connections about the world around you? Can you identify specific moments that you were able to “distance” yourself from Grusha or Adzak's story? Why did these moments in the play stand out?

“Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.”



Resources

A note on the text: Yale Rep’s production uses a version of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* published by Arcade Publishing, translated from the German by James and Tania Stern, with W.H. Auden, and edited by John Willet and Ralph Manheim.

There are several other translations and adaptations of this play, some of which vary widely in approach. However, while we’d recommend reading the above translation to prepare for this production, the Preface and Comments of Eric Bentley’s translation are useful in learning about *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and its history.

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ONLINE RESOURCES

Study Guides

American Conservatory Theater
act-sf.org/home/education/wop/wop_archive.html

Blackeyed Theatre
blackeyedtheatre.co.uk
(Go to Education page and see menu for Education Packs.)

National Theatre, London
nationaltheatre.org.uk/discover-more/digital-classroom/resource-packs

Nottingham Playhouse, Shared Experience & West Yorkshire Playhouse
alistairbeaton.com/chalk_circle.html

YouTube Videos

Here are some great videos to search to help enrich your experience.

“Bertolt Brecht and the Epic Theatre”
(by Abus709)
A great crash course in Brechtian theory.

“Meryl Streep—Theater of War”
(by coconutmilk83)
A short documentary on Meryl Streep in The Public Theater’s production of *Mother Courage and Her Children*.

“An Introduction to Brechtian Theatre”
(by NationalTheatreDiscover)
A short informational segment on how Brecht’s artistic theories get put into practice on stage.

“The Makeup of Taylor Mac”
(by TheFoundryTheatre)
Taylor Mac prepares for his role in The Foundry Theatre’s production of *The Good Person of Szechuan*. Mac’s shares his thoughts on approaching a Brechtian acting style during the first and last few minutes.

“Lotte Lenya Sings ‘Pirate Jenny’”
(by kaatjeaster)

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