

STC Ed presents a Staged Reading of

# **The Caucasian Chalk Circle**

By Bertolt Brecht

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**Education Resource written by Kerreen Ely-Harper and compiled by Education Coordinator Toni Murphy**



AIM of exercise or section



Extension Exercises



Download and watch



Drama Exercises



English Exercises



Play online

## **THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE STAGED READING**

Sydney Theatre Company Education Resources 2012

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### ABOUT STCED

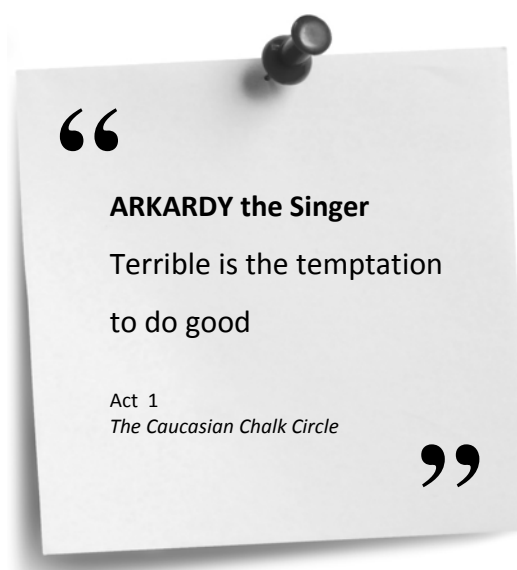
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### CREATIVE TEAM

**Director** – Tom Wright

### CAST

tba



## THEMES

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Epic Theatre

Alienation Effect

Political Theatre

Maternity & Parenting

### THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE STAGED READING 2

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### *Prologue*

*Summer: In the ruins of a Caucasian village, still smouldering from war, meet the representatives of two collective farms.*

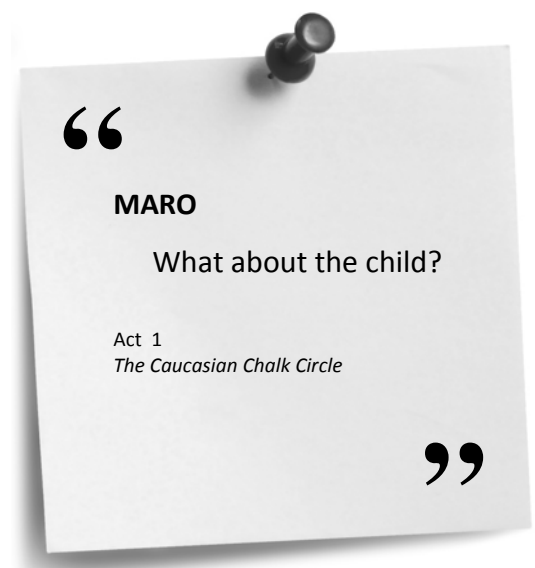
The Second World War is over and two opposing groups of Georgian peasants are having a dispute over the future of a valley. One group of farmers remained in the valley during the German occupation, while the other group of goat-herders were forced to move. Both are claiming their rightful inheritance to the land. An Expert from the State Reconstruction Commission requests they must decide the issue between themselves. The farmers plan to build an irrigation system that will guarantee a sustainable future for the valley's population. The goat herders realize they will also benefit with the new developments and agree to transfer ownership of the land to the farmers. Arkardy the Singer enters and will tell them the story of the Chalk Circle.

### *Act One*

#### *The Noble Child*

Georgia is embroiled in a war with Persia. It is Easter Sunday and the crowds have gathered in the streets to celebrate the Christian feast of Christ's resurrection. The town's Governor, Gyorgi Abashvili and his wife, Natalla present their young son, Mikael, to the crowd for the first time. A soldier of the Governors' guard, Symon meets his love, kitchen –maid Grusha.

But the peace is soon disturbed by a coup unleashing violence and chaos in the city. Symon and Grusha hastily become betrothed as he leaves to accompany the Governor's wife to safety. Natalla in her haste to escape the rebels, leaves her son in the care of a servant, Maro. News of the Governor's murder and the plight of his child, causes Maro to hand the child



to Grusha. With the sound of the rebel politician Kazbeki and his followers approaching, Grusha covers the sleeping child and hides. When they leave she comes out of hiding to find the child is still alive. She sits with him through the night and imagines she can hear him saying, “Woman, help me/Take me from here/ Become a thief/Suppress your grief/And take me from here.” With the sounds of bombs and shells getting louder and closer Grusha takes up the child and flees the city.

### *Act Two*

#### *The Flight Into The Northern Mountains*

Grusha heads for the Northern Mountains. She pays a high price for milk from a farmer who has been robbed by the militia. She disguises herself as a noble woman but her kitchen-maid hands give her away. Unable to get lodgings and transport and the Ironshirts of the Kazbeki hot on her heels, in despair she dumps Mikael on the doorstep of a peasant farm house. To her delight the Fat Peasant Woman takes in the child. Grusha runs into two Ironshirts who are after her. They try to catch her but she breaks free and returns to the peasant’s farm. She pleads with the couple to say the baby is theirs. But as soon as the soldiers appear the peasants disown the child. One of the Ironshirts goes to stab Mikael but Grusha quickly grabs him and escapes. She comes to a glacier footbridge. The cables have snapped but rather than be caught she takes the risk and crosses the dangerous bridge. She makes it safely to the other side and finally acknowledges she and Mikael belong together.

### *Act Three*

#### *In the Northern Mountains*

Grusha arrives at her brother Lavrent’s house. His pious wife Aniko is concerned Grusha is a single woman with a baby and fears she is diseased. Lavrent manages to persuade her to let Grusha and the child stay with them in secret.

In the Spring Lavrent arranges Grusha to marry a gravely ill man. She reluctantly agrees hoping the marriage will legally legitimize Mikael as her son. At the wedding reception the guests announce the war is over. The dying groom, Yussup on hearing he won’t now be called up for military service miraculously recovers.

Simon returns to find Grusha married with a child. When Grusha tries to explain to him the circumstances of her marriage and how she came to have Mikael, two Officers arrive and take the child away. She tells them “he’s my boy”.

#### *Act Four*

##### *The Tale Of The Judge*

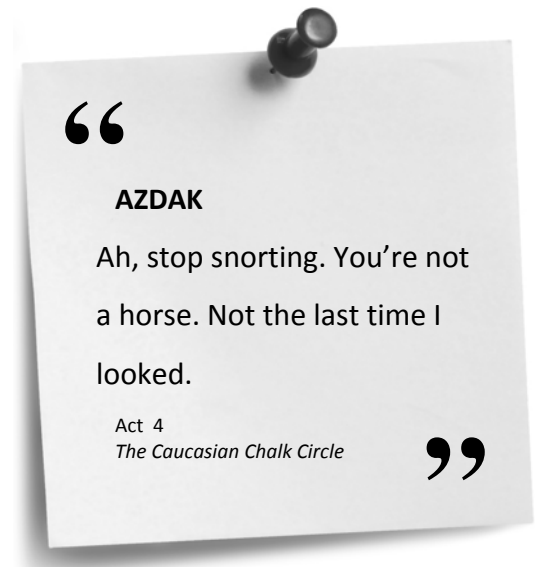
The story now shifts to focus on the village clerk, Azdak. We return to the night of the coup in Act One. Azdak hides a refugee who turns out to be the escaped Republic’s President. Azdak declares himself a traitor to the Ironshirts. They dismiss his confession. Kazbeki arrives with his nephew, whom he wants to be the new judge, (the former having being murdered). But the Ironshirts want to decide who the next judge should be. They stage a mock trial in which Azdak plays the defendant. Impressed by Azdak’s jibes at Kazbeki’s corruption they declare him to be the new judge: ‘The magistrate was always a fool, now the fool can be a judge!

Azdak travels for two years as the Ironshirts ‘honest’ judge while the country is gripped in civil war. He presides over a rape case and a case of theft. He declares a Sad Old Woman innocent after she claims she got a free ham by a miracle, sentencing instead her accusers for not believing in miracles.

#### *Act Five*

##### *The Chalk Circle*

Azdak heads Grusha’s trial over her possession of the Governor’s child. Symon promises to support her by saying the child is his. Grusha argues her case claiming she has raised the child for the past two years, providing for his every need. Natalla argues he is rightfully her son and she has suffered illness and sleeplessness. The real reason she wants her son back is because she cannot inherit the estates of her former husband without him. Azdak questions Grusha further and they end up in furious debate until he suddenly adjourns the court to hear another case of an ancient married couple who want a divorce after forty years of marriage.



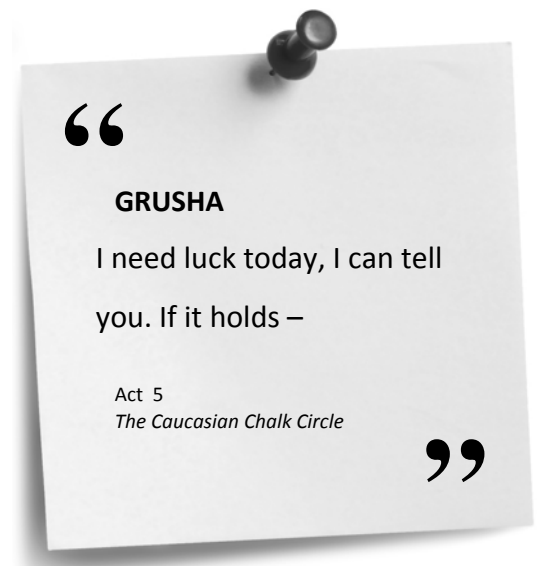
Azdak orders Mikael be brought before him. Natalla is horrified to see him in rags. Undecided as to who should be granted parentage of Mikael he draws a chalk circle on the floor. He asks the child to step inside the circle and orders the two women to pull, saying that whichever woman has the strength to pull the child from out of the circle will be declared the genuine mother. Natalla pulls the child to her as Grusha lets go. Azdak orders they repeat the task and again Grusha lets go fearing the child will be hurt in the tug-of-war. When she appeals to Azdak that she won't risk hurting the child, he declares the boy to be hers and orders Natalla to leave. He declares the family estates be made into a garden for children in his name – 'Azdak's Garden'. He signs Grusha's divorce papers, but leaves the old couple still married. They all hold a dance in celebration. Azdak disappears but is never forgotten by the people of Georgia for his attempt at honesty and justice.

### Consider

Azdak's judgement is the central action of the play.

Brecht believed theatre was for instruction not entertainment.

*The Caucasian Chalk Circle* explores how individual emotional journeys facilitate better communal living.



### References:

*Cognitive Catharsis in The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Darren Gobert, Volume 49, Number 1, Spring 2006, , *Modern Drama*, Volume 49, Number 1, Spring 2006, pp. 12-40

## HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE PLAY

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### Brecht as Refugee

Being a refugee gave him a tremendous sympathy with the dispossessed which burns through *Chalk Circle*.

Frank McGuinness

Having escaped the Nazi regime Brecht wrote *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* while in exile in America at the end of the Second World War. In 1944, his lover and writing associate, the actress Ruth Berlau, gave premature birth to their son, named Mikael (after the child in the play), but he died shortly after birth. Berlau certainly made contributions to the play text, although to what degree is unknown. Brecht remained in the United States until 1947 when he had to testify before the House of Un-American Activities Committee for his Marxist beliefs. He left for Switzerland the next day. Like Grusha he was on the move again in the bid to find a safe haven and future home. Eventually he would resettle in East Berlin, where he reunited with his long term partner and second wife, actress Helene Weigel. In 1949 they set up the Berliner Ensemble.

The connection between the German landscape and motherhood was a provocative one with a long literary tradition. *The Caucasian Chalk Circle's* 'image of the new mother who has escaped the horrors of the past to raise future generations' offered an image of hope and promise for a war ravaged Europe. The play explores the relationship between individual and collective responsibility, social justice and the law against a background of war and political corruption. In the United States Brecht found both a temporary political safe haven and inspiration for his play. His poem 'The Democratic Judge' draws a strong parallel between an American Judge and Azdak as the mock judge trying to administer justice within a corrupt system:

“

**ARKARDY the Singer**

All that there is shall belong  
To those that best care for it

Act 5  
*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*

”

## THE DEMOCRATIC JUDGE

In Los Angeles, before the judge who examines people  
Trying to become citizens of the United States  
Came an Italian restaurant keeper. After grave preparations  
Hindered, though, by his ignorance of the new language  
In the test he replied to the question:  
What is the 8th Amendment? falteringly:  
1492. Since the law demands that applicants know the language  
He was refused. Returning  
After three months spent on further studies  
Yet hindered still by ignorance of the new language  
He was confronted this time with the question: Who was  
The victorious general in the Civil War? His answer was:  
1492. (Given amiably, in a loud voice).  
Sent away again  
And returning a third time, he answered  
A third question: For how long a term are our Presidents elected?  
Once more with: 1492. Now  
The judge, who liked the man, realised that he could not  
Learn the language, asked him  
How he earned his living and was told: by hard work. And so  
At his fourth appearance the judge gave him the question:  
When was America discovered? And on the strength of his correctly answering 1492, he was  
granted his citizenship.

Brecht

### Brecht the Copyist

as a playwright I have copied the Japanese, Greek and Elizabethan drama

Brecht

*The Caucasian Chalk Circle* draws on two source stories - the thirteenth century Chinese play *The Story Of Chalk Circle* (Huilan Ja) by Li Qianfu and the Old Testament story of King Solomon. Both sources tell the story of two women who independently claim to be the true mother of the same child. In the Biblical story when King Solomon orders the child be divided into two with a sword, the true mother is revealed when she declares she is willing to give up the child rather than see the baby killed. Solomon declares the woman who shows compassion to be the true mother, and gives the baby to her.

The original *The Story Of Chalk Circle* had been adapted by the German poet Klabund in 1925 and became the inspiration for Brecht's later version. Brecht is believed to have seen the

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famous Chinese actor Mei Lanfang on tour with his company in Moscow, 1935. His Essay 'Alienation Effects In Chinese Acting' (1936) was inspired by his interest in Chinese Theatre. He likened epic storytelling to 'the kind the Chinese have been using for thousands of years'. Brecht's understanding of Chinese theatre has recently been challenged as limited in context and more an expression of his own theories rather than based on an in depth knowledge of Chinese theatre practice and history.

Brecht was particularly interested in the Chinese theatre's use of direct audience-address, which he proposed disrupted the stage illusion of reality. He believed the Chinese application of a range of theatrical styles - songs, music, monologue, dialogue, poetic verse, marshal arts, dance and pantomime (white face, stylised gesture) - didn't allow for empathy. This mish mash of styles produced a *priem ostraneniya* 'the device of making strange' (Alienation Effect) interrupting the audience's identification with the actor as real. The audience would be made conscious and therefore think about what was being said and represented rather than just left to respond emotionally to the drama. Brecht wrote theatre should provide 'models of men's life together such as could help the spectator to understand his social environment and both rationally and emotionally master it'. The role of the omnipotent narrator, Arkady the Singer, serves the dual function of being the storyteller and instructor framing the story in such a way as to comment on the action, and make us think about what we are witnessing. Brecht wants to 'make the spectator into an actor who would complete the unfinished play, but in real life.'

### References:

"Alienation-Effect" for Whom? Brecht's (Mis)interpretation of the Classical Chinese Theatre Min Tian, *Asian Theatre Journal* Vol. 14, No. 2 (Autumn, 1997), pp. 200-222

*Post-war iconographies: Wandering Women in Brecht, Duras, Kluge*, Caroline Rupprecht, *South Central Review*, Vol 23, Number 2, Summer, 2006

Wikipedia, *The Story Of Chalk Story* and the *Judgement of Solomon* source stories.

## Additional Resources

### On Brecht

*Bertolt Brecht*, Meg Mudford, 2009

### Educational Resources

National Theatre's Education Notes, 2007, online pdf, [nationaltheatre.org.uk](http://nationaltheatre.org.uk)

Brecht Notes, NSW HSC online, Jeffrey Dawson, Charles Sturt University

### Adaptations



*Full Circle* by Charles Mee an adaptation the original play and its Chinese sources, 2000. And *The Berlin Circle* performed by Steppenwolf in 1998  
<http://www.charlesmee.org/html/fullcircle.html>

### Critical Writings On *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*

*Post-war iconographies: Wandering Women in Brecht, Duras , Kluge*, Caroline Rupprecht, South Central Review, Vol 23, Number 2, Summer, 2006

*On "The Caucasian Chalk Circle"*, Bertolt Brecht, Hugo Schmidt and Jerome Clegg  
*Theatre Drama Review (1967-1968)* Vol. 12, No. 1, Bertolt Brecht (Autumn, 1967), pp. 88-100

*The Chalk Circle Comes Full Circle: From Yuan Drama Through the Western Stage to Peking Opera*, Wenwei Du, *Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Autumn, 1995), pp. 307-325

*The Dispute over the Valley: An Essay on Bertolt Brecht's Play, "The Caucasian Chalk Circle"*, Hans-Joachim Bunge and Bayard Quincy Morgan  
*The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Dec., 1959), pp. 50-66

*Women in Brecht's Works*, Sara Lennox, *New German Critique*, No. 14 (Spring, 1978), pp. 83-96  
*Cognitive Catharsis in The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Volume 49, Number 1, Spring 2006, , *Modern Drama*, Volume 49, Number 1, Spring 2006, pp. 12-40

*"Alienation-Effect" for Whom? Brecht's (Mis)interpretation of the Classical Chinese Theatre* Min Tian, *Asian Theatre Journal* Vol. 14, No. 2 (Autumn, 1997), pp. 200-222

*Brecht and the English Theatre*, Martin Esslin, *The Tulane Drama Review* Vol. 11, No. 2 (Winter, 1966), pp. 63-70

*Voice and Narration in Postmodern Drama*, Brian Robertson, *New Literary History*, Volume 32, Number 3, Summer 2001, pp. 681-694