



CurtainUp

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A CurtainUp Review

The Caucasian Chalk Circle

By [Deirdre Donovan](#)

Terrible is the temptation to do good! . . . — The Singer

Should law and possessions be open to review? This question is at the core of Bertolt Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. And in the new production by the Performance Lab 115 (following a two-year collaboration with Mabou Mines) at The Chocolate Factory, the same question is posed, but with a distinct American inflection.

Brecht's play written during World War II while the German playwright was in "exile" in California, is essentially a modern-day retelling of the judgment of King Solomon, in which two women (the Governor's wife and the servant Grusha) claim the same child. The Solomon figure is a "mock" judge named Azdak, who strangely proves that he is canny enough to untangle the evidence, implement the right judicial stratagem and decide whose claim is valid. Azdak is not cut from the same cloth as King Solomon, however. He takes bribes openly in the court, and chronically favors the poor over the rich and, much like the legendary Robin Hood, he is loved by the poor and has unmistakable charm in spite of his ethical shortcomings.

The current production leans heavily on Eric Bentley's translation, but director Alice Reagan has streamlined the story and appropriated the Eastern setting to an American milieu. Set in a half-built building taken over by squatters, and drawing on "disaster ballad" folk songs to drive the story forward, brings the action into contemporary relief without compromising Brecht's basic tenets. Thus we see naked lights suspended from the ceiling, listen to a Singer narrate the story simultaneously enacted or mimed.

The main action is performed in the Chocolate Factory's performing space, but the Prologue is vividly brought to life in the basement of the theater's building to which the actors lead the audience from the lobby. Once everybody is gathered, the opening parable commences. It consists of a discussion of the rights to a piece of land between two groups of peasants—the goat-breeding Galinskis and the fruit-farming Luxemburgs—who return to the land after the Nazis have been driven out. The moral of the story is that the land should go to whoever will make better use of it.

This Prologue to *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* was for many years omitted from American productions because of its controversial political overtones. However, after the Minnesota Theater Company included it in their 1965 production with no untoward occurrences, other theater companies also began using it.

Actually, the play consists of two stories that come together at the end. The first story centers on the kitchen servant Grusha and the second on the mock judge, Azdak. It's impossible to relate all the complexities here but suffice it to say that the bifurcated tale brims with irony, especially in its religious themes and rituals. The main action opens on Easter Sunday morning, an ironic setting considering that the Governor will be beheaded by his brother Prince Kazbeki (Chris Richards) later that day. The religious values will be further inverted as we see all seven sacraments ridiculously re-enacted in some form. Brecht makes it evident that many characters are only Christian in name, not deed.

The acting is a true ensemble effort. Rebecca Lingafelter turns in a reliable performance as the Singer. Rachel Schwartz is rightly arrogant as the Governor's wife. Rachel Jablin injects equal portions of naiveness and intelligence in her Grusha. Jeff Clarke, as the soldier Simon, is quite convincing. And Marty Keiser, as the "mock judge" Azdak, possesses eccentric charm and comic flair. No doubt much of the credit belongs to Alice Reagan, who helms the work with a steady hand so that there's not a dull spot in the two-hour evening.

The Chocolate Factory's provocative retooling of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* as an American fable is a good reason to check out this off-the-beaten-path venue. It's located in Queens, but only a few minutes by subway from Grand Central Station.