

## Chocolate Factory's Caucasian Chalk Circle

By Vladic Ravich



There is a powerful overlap between the mission of the Chocolate Factory Theatre in Long Island City, which calls for “work that requires new methods, more time, and a new kind of audience” and their recent production of Bertolt Brecht’s *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, which ends its run there on Saturday.

In the beginning of the production, two groups of Russian peasants debate the use of a field now that the war has ended. Should it be for goats to graze or for growing fruit? As the two sides bicker, a female tractor driver half jokes, “all entertainment must be rationed” like wine, cigarettes, “and discussion.”

Brecht’s own vision of the theatre includes this rationing process. There are songs, but they’re not meant to be hooks; there’s a love story, but the baby comes first; and for all the mirror, like the plays of Ibsen or Chekhov, and focuses instead on communicating moral conflicts and large scale political – or is that economic? or military? – forces. The characters and the settings of the plays are like fairy tales, deliberately foreign and unfamiliar, in the hope of reigniting the interest of the viewer, of making the common-place new.

It is initially hard to follow the names and details of this story, especially with the audience wondering if they’ll be on their feet for two hours. But just as the intimacy of the basement begins to fade into discomfort, the Singer leads everyone upstairs with a parable sung to the rafters about a version of King Solomon that the Singer hopes will shed light on the peasants’ dispute.

Thus the play begins, with its exotic locations and characters all woven into complex (and timeless) battles for power and money. Brecht was a lifelong communist and does not hide his contempt for the wealthy and powerful, along with the methods they use to maintain their authority. But for all the confusion and morality of his plays, the poetry of his dialogue elevates the whole messy – not to mention loud – experience into an powerful play that has remained relevant, and vital, for over 65 years.

When Grusha finds an abandoned child she begins to love it as her own “because your nose is so small.”

“I’d love to have kept you... I’d have shown you your first rabbit,” she says, exhausted after running from invaders all night.

Her dilemma, whether to keep a child she has found despite the fact that there are “iron shirts” looking to kill the baby, is just one of the redemptive aspects of life floating through Brecht’s ruthless and poetically succinct depiction of the dehumanizing forces of War, Money and Real Estate.

“Terrible is the temptation to do good!” says the Singer, and later, “In the bloodiest times, there are still good people.”

Brecht’s humor is a constant companion to the tribulations his characters suffer: “Death to the fascists!” says one of the peasants, “we brought cheese!” And while his heroine is sincere in everything from flirting to slaughtering a goose, Brecht loads his play with sarcasm – “I won’t have a revolver pointed at my chest,” says an old man to soldier. “But they are only pointing a pencil,” the soldier responds.

PL115 does an admirable job of keeping this multifaceted fairy tale moving forward. The excellent staging that gives room to the tender moments and lungs to the spectacle of cruelty that coexist in Brecht’s alternate reality.

Oh, and it’s a musical, too, with a set list on the wall and a banjo player onstage the whole time. But Brecht is not interested in tugging heart strings or inflicting catchy tunes – the songs, simple as they may appear, are loaded with contradictory messages and philosophy. It’s both a homage and affront to that quintessential American genre, the musical.

The play has been reset in modern America, and the program’s description draws parallels with the today’s economic woes, but this updating seems to be beside the point. Brecht’s plays are meant to be foreign, to underscore the universality of his message. That said, the modern parallels are not heavy handed (except one reference to “change one can believe in,” which is not in the original text) and the frenzy of power of this new theatre still reverberates, whether the actors eat dumplings or pizza.

The cast occasionally struggles to find the musicality in the lines meant to be sung, but that may have as much to do with the difficulty of translating Brecht as anything else. The productions’ desire to be loud occasionally outshines some of the ingenious details in the directing and acting, but PL115 certainly deserves praise for executing this complex play in keeping with Brecht’s desire: to reengage an audience too often so sedated by empathy that they are unable to see outside of themselves.

The theater is located at 5-49, 49th Ave. Call (718) 482-7069 or go to [chocolatefactorytheater.org](http://chocolatefactorytheater.org) to learn more.