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The Caucasian Chalk Circle



Synopsis

Few authors have had such a dramatic effect as Bertolt Brecht. His work has helped to shape a generation of writers, theatergoers, and thinkers. His plays are studied worldwide as texts that changed the face of theater. The Caucasian Chalk Circle is a parable inspired by the Chinese play Chalk Circle. Written at the close of World War II, the story is set in the Caucasus Mountains of Georgia. It retells the tale of King Solomon and a child claimed by and fought over by two mothers. But this chalk circle is metaphorically drawn around a society misdirected in its priorities. Brecht's statements about class are cloaked in the innocence of a fable that whispers insistently to the audience. No translations of Brecht's work are as reliable and compelling as Eric Bentley's. These versions are widely viewed as the standard renderings of Brecht's work, ensuring that future generations of readers will come in close contact with the work of a playwright who introduced a new way of thinking about the theater.

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Customer Reviews

'an adept new translation by Alistair Beaton' Dominic Maxwell, The Times, 2.10.09 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle, written in 1944 while he was in exile from Germany, gives some epic illumination to socialist ideas about ownership and injustice. But more than that it's a story about love winning out over endemic corruption' Dominic Maxwell, The Times, 2.10.09 --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Text: English (translation) Original Language: German

One of the master communist playwright Bertolt Brecht's strengths as an artist was the ability to set up a moral dilemma and work it out to a conclusion, not always a satisfactory one, by play's end. This is unusual in a seemingly orthodox follower of the old Stalinist 'socialist realist' cultural program. This work nevertheless permitted Brecht to address an age-old question about the nature of property ownership, extending it from its natural and historic setting in land and chattels to the question of personal human ownership. The question posed here is whether a child abandoned by its natural mother then found and raised by another woman should go to the former or that latter. Nice dilemma, right? But Brecht, as seen in *Mother Courage* and other parables, is not above cutting right to the bone on moral questions. What makes this work a cut above some of Brecht's more didactic plays is the way that he weaves the parable about the odd resolution of an ancient Chinese property dispute and places that 'wisdom' in context of a then current dispute between two Soviet-era communes. In the ancient dispute the judge who is called upon to render judgment, using the circle as a medium to resolve the dispute, seems to be Solomonic but is really a buffoon. This is pure Brechtian irony. This says as much about Brecht's attitude toward property as it does about the old time Chinese justice system. The question of property rights as presented by Brecht and their value as a societal glue is also something the reader or viewer of this play should think about as well.

Brecht's "The Caucasian Chalk Circle," written in self-imposed exile towards the end of World War II, is a story within a play, in which a bard, or singer, interrupts a group of Caucasian farmers arguing over ownership of land that has been ravaged by Nazi tanks and entertains them with a relevant tale of yore. In a city called Grusinia, the Governor is executed in a coup and his wife flees for her life, abandoning their baby son Michael, who is picked up by a humble kitchen maid named Grusha. Having recently betrothed herself to a soldier named Simon who is away on duty, she sets out on a cross-country journey with the infant to get help from her brother, a farmer in a distant village. Lavrenti, her brother, suggests she get married immediately to avoid suspicion that the baby is hers out of wedlock, and the most available candidate is a local wretched peasant. After living with this man for a couple of years, Grusha is apprehended by soldiers who have come to take young Michael, the sole heir of the deposed Governor's estate, back to Grusinia. The case of Michael's custody, contested by the Governor's wife against Grusha, is brought to trial, where the judge, a drunk named Azdak whose unofficial appointment to this position is a farce, decrees that

the boy will be placed inside a circle drawn with chalk on the courtroom floor, and that the woman who is able to pull him out of the circle is the real mother. (Study the judge's exact words when you read this.) Although the story is of medieval Chinese origin, Brecht's play is a sort of refashioning of the Biblical anecdote about Solomon and expands the idea by supplying a whole backstory to the women's argument. Solomon's judgment is accepted because his wisdom is universally considered to be impeccable, but what of a man like Azdak who functions on whim more than on wisdom? The ending is subtly brilliant in the sense that the outcome of the contest is subject to semantic debate (whether you think the judgment is fair or logical or contradictory depends on how closely you read the judge's words), but also in the question of irony or sincerity in the suggestion that true justice will be conferred by nature rather than by man.

The Caucasian Chalk Circle is a very entertaining and enjoyable play to read or perform, whilst also containing attitudes and ideologies to analyze. It's a great read for its own sake, but can also easily be used to teach literature in a classroom. A great play!

Great price and a good read!

It's popular now-a-days to call communism "out of touch" and socialism "out of style." Brecht's question, then: Who should own anything? Should possession be nine-tenths of the law? Or should the laws of ownership remain an open-ended affair? -- could be called a foregone conclusion. Woe to the foregone conclusion, then. Its trial date is ever on the way. Laughably, the Helms-Burton bill, recently signed into law by Pres. Bill Clinton, is a giggle back to Brecht's discussion. And a silly one. One should think that were the United States to be in the business of giving back land "once stolen," that the Navajo, Sioux, Chippewa, et. al. would be first in line. Not so! Apparently, Cuba's land belongs not to its current owners, but to its capitalists of 40 years hence. Oh, silliness. Oh, amusement. So ask Brecht's question, then, not as a socialist, a communist or a red. Ask it as a human being. To whom does anything belong? What is belonging? What is ownership? Who owns anything? When - and why - does ownership occasionally turn on its own head?

Nice cheap method to pick up the reading for the theater history class. It's used but it's was still in a shape that will last you. And it came on time depending on your delivery method.

My son's theatre department is putting on this play. My son tried out for a part. He made the first cut,

got all excited and wanted the play. However, he did not make the second cut. I believe he is returning the book. Thanks so much Sandy Rodie

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