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THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE



Photo by Jenny Graham

Antaeus Theatre Company

I was 11 or 12 when I first saw Lotte Lenya perform in concert in a Chicago nightclub and heard her unique interpretations of her late husband Kurt Weill's musical genius. I was knocked out both by Lenya and the music Weill composed—but it was the lyrics of the songs written by Bertolt Brecht in collaboration with Weill that made my head explode.

That introduction to Brecht was the beginning of my journey discovering all the countercultural wonders the world that great art has to offer. His epic plays sent me soaring off to new heights soaking in the classic works of boldly unstoppable dissenters with names such as Kerouac, Genet, Williams, Baldwin, and with some embarrassment Ayn Rand, all of whom, along with Brecht, inspired me to race from one literary gem to the next.

The body of work collectively created by these literary gods sent any notion of adhering to convention and proper protocol in my own personal quest for windmills out the proverbial window for me and changed my life forever, yet no writer had a bigger influence on me than Brecht.

In 1963, Lenya joined George Voskovec, Anne Jackson, Vivica Lindfors, and a few other theatrical greats to appear in *Brecht on Brecht*, which took sections of his plays and poetry and presented them concert-style interspersed with audio of Brecht's actual testimony in the McCarthy hearings that soon after sent him once again into East German exile to escape prosecution in good ol' A'murka.

I didn't get to see *Brecht on Brecht* originally performed but eagerly wore out the spoken-word LP of the performance released later that year. Then, as a junior in high school, I directed a section of it for a school project and several years later, I was thrilled to be cast in a university mounting of it, especially when I learned I'd be working onstage with a prestigious guest artist: Lotte Lenya.

In retrospect, I'm purdy sure I wore out my welcome with the former Weill's talented widow, asking endless questions and coaxing stories and opinions out of the poor thing during our run, which in retrospect might be why, though initially full of praise for my performance, she clearly began politely to avoid me, something maybe explaining why I was the only castmember not brought along to the production's next touring engagement.

Over the years, I have gotten to see all of Brecht's plays performed and have personally appeared in several, including his adaptation of Marlowe's *Edward II* in Michael Michetti's gloriously inventive 2001 homage to Brecht's concept of "epic theatre" for Circle X at the Actors' Gang and then, several years later, I had the privilege of playing Chicago mobster Givola in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* in the Classical Theatre Lab's mounting at USVAA in Culver City.

Although I had read *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* many times and have through the years worked with many students performing scenes from Brecht's 1944 masterpiece in my classes, I've actually never seen a production of it attempted—until now.

Lucky for me and any rabid fan of Brecht, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is being presented right here and now in our vast desert cultural wasteland by Antaeus, our town's most reliable classical theatre company, beautifully mounted and brilliantly directed by Stephanie Shroyer, who helmed Antaeus' memorable site-specific version of the master's *Mother Courage and her Children* in a North Hollywood warehouse space 14 years ago.

The Caucasian Chalk Circle marked a fascinating departure for Brecht, who had for years led a nomadic existence as he fled Nazi Germany to reside in Denmark, then Sweden and Finland before seeking asylum in the U.S. in 1941.

As the once-celebrated playwright sought work as a screenwriter, he would meet with Thomas Mann and a group of other displaced German intellectual expats each morning at the Snow White Coffeeshop on Hollywood Boulevard (next to the Stella Adler Academy the theatres now) to complain to one another about how much they hated it here, particularly when trying to do business with The Business.

In 1946, Brecht wrote: "I ran from the tigers, I ran from the fleas. What got me at last? Mediocrities." Truly, his Hollywood years are a fascinating study for anyone interested in a different view of Los Angeles' eclectic history than I'll bet you've ever encountered before. Google it; that's what it's there for, right?

The Caucasian Chalk Circle, Brecht admitted, was written with a somewhat bastardized new direction in mind, with more emphasis toward pacifism than as a treatise skewering class struggle and political oppression. He geared it instead toward more generic middle-class American sensibilities, something

he felt lacked substance and import yet he felt incorporated, especially in in our grandly constructed musical theatre, “certain epic devices” that intrigued him.

And so this play, although not premiering until several years after its completion and then at a small college in Minnesota championed and translated from the German by Brecht’s friend and admirer Eric Bentley, was not performed on Broadway where it was originally written to debut until 1966, a decade after its creator’s death. It is not often presented, surely because it is such an enormous undertaking, but no producing entity is more up to the task than Antaeus.

Shroyer’s vision begins in the theatre lobby where, as patrons wait for the doors to open, actors quietly infiltrate their ranks and suddenly begin a dialogue between two groups of rural citizens in the fictional country Grusinia (a name derived from the Russian exonym for Georgia), who heatedly debate whether land returned to them after a war should again be used to raise goats or instead be turned over to a new breed of semi-industrialized farmer with more modern ideas of how the place could become an agricultural boomtown.

This leads us all into the theatre, where the arguing factions are joined by a troupe of musicians and together join to present an allegorical morality tale that will possibly help cool heads and lead to more productive discussion. Brecht based the play-within-a-play these humble peasants present on a German translation of an ancient classic Chinese *zaju* verse play, itself clearly derived from the fable “Judgment of Solomon”—or did those sneaky inventors of the Hebrew Bible borrow it from the Chinese?

Either way, *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, on Frederica Nascimento’s sparse but versatile set with Antaeus’ theatre space opened to the walls for the first time on both sides of the wings, explodes with wonder as the 16 dazzlingly committed performers play all the roles, not to mention all the instruments. Alistair Beaton’s sharply contemporary adaptation is superbly staged—no, choreographed—by Stroyer as though we are watching a three-ring circus without elephants or aerialists.

All the kinetic though strikingly austere staging and 15 (of 16) balls-out performances from a uniquely dynamic troupe of actors who clearly understand the broadly brazen demands of the master’s “epic” style without overdoing it (the 16th), make this production quintessentially Brechtian. It is mesmerizing in its continuously in-your-face delivery, yet manages to mesmerize without either missing the subtly signature humor written into the piece or overemphasizing any of the morality lessons, cultural indictments, or political jabs lurking stealthily just below the visual spectacle.

Steve Hofvendahl is a real asset as the narrator of the piece, delivering poetic yet hilariously confused diatribes from the sides of ladders about the residents of the community and the human race in general throughout most of the first act. Then as the play progresses, he becomes Azdak, a local farmer who despite any experience or education is elevated to become the judge of the community. His judgments are severely questionable, usually demanding a “gratitude” to the court dropped into a jar he holds on his throne-like bench.

At least Azdak has a good heart, a townsman speculates, a determination the Judge himself disputes. “I don’t have a good heart!” he corrects with some disgust. “I’m an intellectual!”

Aside from exceptional performances that could define the term “ensemble cast”—something that obviously would not have been possible without a considerable amount of grueling rehearsals one might envision were led by the ghost of R. Lee Ermey in *Full Metal Jacket*—there’s one aspect of this piece that needs special commendation.

Unlike the days when Brecht added songs to his plays with the invaluable contribution of composer Kurt Weill and others during the later period when he founded East Berlin's historic Berliner Ensemble, by the time he was grousing every morning with Mann and the others at the Snow White, his plays from that period only offered poetic passages with the expectation they would be turned into lyrics set to music by whomever was presenting the piece.

When I belted through Givola's "Song of the Whitewash" in *Arturo Ui*, according to my old disintegrating script, the music for the songs in the show were composed for the original production there by Berliner Ensemble's resident musical director Hans-Dieter Hosalla. Here, however, although not mentioned in the program, I'm informed by Antaeus' resident publicist *extraordinaire* Lucy Pollak's always informative press release that there's no officially published score and all of the hearty, impressively Weimar-savvy music and songs were created by Shroyer and the acting ensemble.

To say what they have created is a remarkable feat is a true understatement. The music, the delivery of the songs, and the musical accompaniment on accordions and fiddles, as well as the occasional triangle and cowbell, is impressive and absolute perfection. Ol' Bertolt, as well as Mr. Weill, I suspect, would surely be impressed.

"You people want justice?" the Judge taunts his critics and naysayers among the populace with a sardonic laugh. "But... can you pay for it?" Considering the brazen and equally immoral era our country is struggling to survive right now at the hands of a troll who crawled out from under a rock and his soulless minions openly looking the other way, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is a cleverly entertaining yet haunting reminder of what can happen when uncontrolled greed overpowers simple morality.

In 1953's *Buchow Elegies*, Bertolt Brecht wrote:

"I sit by the roadside watching the driver changing wheels.

I do not like the place I am coming from. I do not like the place I am going to.

So, why do I watch him changing the wheel with such impatience?"

THROUGH AUG. 26: Antaeus Theatre Company, 110 E. Broadway, Glendale. 818.506.1983 or www.Antaeus.org