

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

Carey Perloff, Artistic Director

PRESENTS

# WORDS <sup>on</sup> PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

## *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*

BY BERTOLT BRECHT

TRANSLATED BY DOMENIQUE LOZANO

DIRECTED AND DESIGNED BY JOHN DOYLE

ORIGINAL MUSIC BY NATHANIEL STOOKEY

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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## CHARACTERS, CAST, AND SYNOPSIS OF

### *THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE*

*The Caucasian Chalk Circle* was first produced in English (translated by Eric Bentley) at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, May 4–8, 1948. The play was first produced in German by Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in Berlin, opening October 7, 1954. The world premiere of Dominique Lozano’s A.C.T.–commissioned translation opened at the American Conservatory Theater February 18, 2010.

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#### ENSEMBLE

René Augesen  
Nick Childress  
Manoel Felciano  
Anthony Fusco  
Rod Gnapp  
Caroline Hewitt  
Omozé Idehenre  
Gregory Wallace  
Jack Willis

#### SYNOPSIS

##### I. THE HEAVENLY CHILD

A Singer introduces the story: On Easter Sunday in Nukha—a small town in the principality of Grusinia, which is fighting a bloody war against Persia—the wealthy Governor, Georgi Abaschwili, and his beautiful, vain wife, Natalie, leave their palace to go to church. Their only son and heir, Michael, is brought before the people for the first time. The family is greeted by Prince Kazbeki, the seemingly obsequious “Fat Prince.” Simon Chachava, a soldier, and Grusche Vachnadze, a servant, meet and flirt. At first all seems calm, but a military coup is underway, led by the subordinate princes of Grusinia, who are unhappy at the way the Grand Prince is conducting the Persian war. They want to overthrow the Grand Prince and his governors. An alarm sounds from the palace, and two soldiers march the Governor off in handcuffs. Fighting breaks out in the city, and the palace is thrown into chaos, as servants scurry about trying to pack for the Governor’s family to escape. Simon and Grusche agree to marry, and he promises to return to her when the war is over—in “two

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*Grusche*

weeks, maybe three.” She promises to wait for him. The Governor’s Wife, preoccupied with trying to choose which of her numerous fancy dresses she can bear to part with, flees, obliviously abandoning her child, Michael. The Fat Prince, revealed to be a leader of the revolt, arrives with his troops bearing the Governor’s head on a pike; he orders his men to search for the child. Reluctant to accept responsibility for Michael, but unwilling to abandon him to a likely gruesome fate, Grusche hides the child from the soldiers and sits by him through the night; at dawn she steals away with him.

## II. THE FLIGHT INTO THE NORTHERN MOUNTAINS

Grusche decides to flee to the home of her brother, Lavrenti, in the Northern Mountains and to wait there in safety until the war is over.

Along the way, she buys milk for Michael at

an exorbitant price from an Old Farmer whose land has been ransacked by soldiers. She tries to pretend she is an aristocrat in order to share a room at an inn with two high-born ladies also on the run, but her willingness to work and cracked servant’s hands give her away. Forced back to the road to continue her flight, she attempts to leave Michael with a peasant couple whose farm has not yet been touched by violence, but the Fat Prince’s men overtake her. She bashes one of them over the head and escapes with Michael. After 22 days of wandering, they reach the Janga-Tau glacier, where Grusche finally accepts as her own the child she has come to love. They arrive at a 2,000-foot-deep gorge spanned by a dangerously rotten bridge. As the Fat Prince’s men draw near, a desperate Grusche takes the chance, steps onto the swaying bridge, and makes it safely to the other side with Michael.

## III. IN THE NORTHERN MOUNTAINS

Sick with exhaustion, Grusche arrives at her brother’s farm, expecting comfort and safety after her extraordinary journey. She receives little of either. Fearing the angry reaction of his pious wife, Anna, to having an unwed mother in the house, Lavrenti tells Anna that

Grusche is on the way to meet her husband “over the mountain.” She reluctantly agrees to take Grusche and Michael in. Grusche spends a bleak winter cowering in the cold and watching Michael grow. Lavrenti fears that the truth about Grusche and the child will come out, so when spring arrives, he arranges for her to marry a dying man so that she can become a widow, giving her and Michael some degree of legitimacy. For Michael’s sake, she agrees. After the wedding, however, hearing the news that the war is over and the Grand Prince has returned to power, the groom, Jussup, makes a miraculous recovery. He has been dodging the draft by pretending to be sick. Time passes: Michael continues to grow, and Grusche grudgingly becomes a wife. Eventually Simon returns and comes to find Grusche in the mountains. As she tries to explain to him what has happened, the authorities arrive and seize Michael. Hearing Grusche tell the men that Michael is hers, Simon is devastated by her betrayal and leaves. Grusche runs after the men who are carrying away her child.

#### IV. THE STORY OF THE JUDGE

The story backtracks to the day of the coup, the day Grusche took Michael: While poaching in the woods, the village clerk, Azdak, has come across someone he believes to be a refugee. He has brought the man home and agrees to hide him from the police. Only after the man has gone does Azdak discover that it was the Grand Prince himself, who escaped the clutches of the rebel princes. Ashamed of himself for helping “the Great Butcher” escape, Azdak turns himself in, expecting to be punished. At the courthouse, he finds that the judge has been hanged and the Fat Prince’s Tank Drivers are in control. Azdak is himself nearly hanged by taunting Tank Drivers, but they let him go, laughing. The Fat Prince brings in his nephew to be ratified as the new judge, but the Tank Drivers, after testing the nephew in a mock trial in which Azdak accuses the rebel princes of profiting from the Persian war, make Azdak judge instead.

During two years of civil war, Azdak presides over legal disputes, turning the law on its head, doling out “tweaked” justice and accepting bribes as he sees fit, while taking from the



*Der Azdak*

rich and giving to the poor. Finally, the unrest ends, the Grand Prince comes back, the Fat Prince is killed, and the Governor's Wife returns from exile, determined to find Michael. Frightened that his behavior over the past two years will land him in trouble now that order is restored, Azdak promises to help Natalie Abaschwili get her son back.

#### V. THE CHALK CIRCLE

The story returns to Nukha, where Grusche anxiously awaits the trial that will determine who is Michael's rightful mother. Simon offers to swear that he is the child's father. The Governor's Wife arrives with her lawyers in tow. Azdak, who has been declared an enemy of the newly restored regime, is dragged in and stripped of his judge's robe. He is about to be hanged when a messenger arrives announcing that the Grand Prince would like Azdak to remain as judge, in gratitude for saving his life that Easter Sunday.

Restored to power, Azdak presides over a trial in which he must judge who gets Michael—Grusche, who has risked her life to care for him; or his biological mother, Natalie, who abandoned him. Hearing the arguments, Azdak learns that the late Governor's estate is tied to his heir; the Governor's Wife has nothing unless she can convince the court to give Michael to her.

Azdak invokes the ancient wisdom of the chalk circle: the child is placed in the center of the circle, and Azdak declares that whoever is strong enough to pull him out must be the true mother. Grusche lets go, allowing the Governor's Wife to pull Michael out of the circle; she can't bear to hurt him. Azdak orders the women to repeat the trial. Grusche again cannot pull. Azdak judges her to be the true mother and awards the estate to the city, so that a children's playground can be made out of it. The Governor's Wife faints.

Azdak decides to hang up his judge's robe, but he first signs a decree granting Grusche a divorce from Jussup, leaving her free to marry Simon. She explains to Simon that she took Michael because she fell in love with Simon on that Easter day, so he is truly "a child of love." Everyone dances. Azdak disappears. The Singer explains the moral of the story:

That what is here, should belong to those who deserve it—  
The children to the motherly,  
So they may thrive,  
The wagons to the good drivers,  
So they are well driven,  
And the valley to those who water it,  
So it may bear fruit.