

Brecht vs. Broadway

By David Hlavsa

In his youth, Bertolt Brecht had been excited by a mythical place. America represented energy, vigor, directness and the will to change — virtues sorely lacking in the European cultural scene. But in 1935, when the playwright traveled to New York to look in on a production of his play *The Mother*, he developed a markedly different opinion. The New York Theatre Union had not wanted him to come; his opinions and theories were unwelcome. Brecht, in frustration at the actors' lack of understanding and his own inadequate English, took to storming about the theatre, bellowing, "Das ist dreck! Das ist scheisse!" In 1941, when he and his family were forced to flee their home-in-exile in Helsinki for the safety of California, Brecht's disdain for Broadway was soon matched by a loathing for Hollywood. Far from being the expanse of possibility Brecht had fantasized about, the breadth of America now seemed to him a wasteland.

True to form, rather than acquiesce to an aesthetic he found repulsive, he determined to alter it.

Brecht's efforts to turn out a successful Hollywood screenplay were for the most part as serious as they were doomed. Ever the skeptic and (in his own particular way) the Marxist, Brecht was fond of taking potshots at, for example, the American Family or Free Enterprise — volleys not appreciated in a time of morale-building and positive thinking. His heroes were strangely ambivalent creatures and his dramatic theory anathema to an industry wholeheartedly devoted to escapist fantasy. By the time he arrived in America, Brecht had already written most of what is now considered his greatest work. He knew his material would suffer at the hands of those unacquainted with his theory and practice of theatre. And so he further damned his own efforts at production by a seemingly unreasonable insistence on artistic control. Ever critical of others' work, Brecht hardly ever missed a chance to endorse his own.



Some of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle's* tenderness, and a good measure of its toughness, may be ascribed to Ruth Berlau, shown with the playwright above. Brecht's collaborator and mistress, Berlau gave birth to a son which the pair called Michel, after the child in *Chalk Circle*. The boy died a few days later.

Few respected him; most saw him simply as a naive foreigner fresh off the boat or a raving egoist.

Despite appearances, however, Brecht never claimed perfection to the Americans — he never considered his writings finished and was constantly revising them. Whatever deficiencies he found were, theoretically, in the process of being corrected. In 1944, when Brecht started *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, he had been actively rethinking his entire stylistic approach.

When the Austrian-born film actress, Luise Rainer (who had won an Academy Award for her role in *The Good Earth*), got Brecht a commission to write an adaptation of Klabund's *Chalk Circle* as a vehicle for her, a Broadway production seemed possible at last. The plan never materialized. But the finished script, somewhat closer to contemporary dramatic standards than Brecht's other work, reveals an author trying to construct a play that, if not tailor-made for a New York audience, would at least be a loose fit.



As *Chalk Circle* progressed, the character of Grusha became less and less like the play's star, Luise Rainer, and more and more like the "salt of the earth" character in Bruegel's *Dulle Greit*.

Adopting devices he had once dismissed as "narcotic," Brecht created a relatively smooth narrative with a comparatively strong sense of suspense, climax and resolution. He even chose a story with a love interest and — save us — a happy ending. Further, there was a market for resistance dramas at the time. Azdak, as saboteur of the ruling regime, put the play within that popular genre.

Finally, there is a certain tenderness in the play, a remarkably prominent emotional quality. This empathic element may or may not have evolved by design. Certainly Brecht chose a story conducive to emotion, but events in his personal life may have influenced his choices as well. Ruth Berlau, Brecht's collaborator and his mistress, had become pregnant by him and so was constantly in his thoughts. The extent of her actual contribution to the material is not known, but it is clear that Brecht wrote his play, in part, to shore up a woman in a difficult situa-

Continued on page 11...

Brecht vs. Broadway

Continued from page 9 . . .

tion. Berlau had to undergo surgery because of a tumor and the child was born prematurely. Brecht and Berlau's son died a few days later; they had named him Michel after the child in the play. Some of *Chalk Circle's* tenderness, and a good measure of its toughness, may be ascribed to Berlau.

Brecht the theorist always claimed that his theatre was aimed at the mind, rather than the emotions. Whether the emotional content of *Chalk Circle* was

Brecht struggled with *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*; it took him ten weeks to write — three times longer than usual.

a manifestation of Brecht's emotional state or was calculated to suit American popular taste is open to question.

But on the whole, Brecht's concessions to the American mainstream are better seen as attempts to divert its force rather than desperate measures to stay afloat. His collaboration on the screenplay of *Hangmen Also Die* had lent him temporary financial security. And even if Brecht wanted to "sell out," the evidence suggests that he was constitutionally unable to do so. Brecht struggled with *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*; it took him ten weeks to write — three times longer than usual. At the outset, Grusha was less complex, more good-natured; Azdak, wily and unscrupulous, but less motivated. It would have been good business sense to remain faithful to Rainer as his main inspiration for Grusha, but Brecht, never much for fidelity, drew more heavily on other sources as his work progressed. Among these was a peasant woman in a Bruegel painting. As Grusha evolved, Rainer the sentimental beauty came closer to extinction, and Bruegel's rough "salt of the earth," *Dulle Greit*, flourished. Grusha became, like other great Brechtian protagonists, a study in contradiction,

a "sucker" (Brecht's word) hurled into situations where she makes heroic choices. Likewise, Azdak became not simply a thief touched with honor, but a revolutionary afflicted with cowardice as well. More, Brecht's interest in the chalk circle parable was obviously stimulated by its Marxist implications.

Still, the final result of Brecht's efforts would have been considerably more accessible to a 1945 Broadway audience than any of his other works. The play's Marxist content is relatively palatable and non-confrontational for Brecht, the lover of the difficult lesson. But producers in New York were not interested. They evaluated the play in the only terms they knew: dramatically, it was too loosely constructed; politically, it was too tightly wound. Ironically, the world premiere of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* took place in 1948 — just after Brecht had left America — at Carlton College in Northfield, Minnesota. This and other college productions marked the beginning of American awareness of Brecht, at least in academic circles. Brecht himself did not again take up the play until 1954, ten years after he had begun it. By then, he and his wife, Helene Weigel, had established The Berliner Ensemble. After a lifetime of struggle, Brecht was at last able to rehearse more or less on his own terms. Rehearsals for *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* took eight months; ideas were tried, tossed about, adopted and discarded. The production opened to international acclaim.

It was still another decade before *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* was produced in the American commercial theatre. It has yet to be mounted on Broadway.

David Hlavsa recently directed *Woyzeck* at the University of Washington, and currently serves as Directing/Literary Intern at the Seattle Rep.

A BRECHT CHRONOLOGY

1898

Bertolt Brecht born in Augsburg, Germany, to middle-class parents.

1917-1918

Begins work on *Baal*.

1922

Brecht's second play, *Drums in the Night*, is well-received in Munich, panned in Berlin. The playwright marries Marianne Zoff after she becomes pregnant.

1923

Hitler's abortive coup in Munich. Brecht is on Hitler's death list.

1926

Brecht begins to read Karl Marx.

1927

Works with composer Kurt Weill on *Mahagonny*. The opera, intensely critical of capitalism, marks Brecht's final rejection of expressionism and his commitment to the science of Marxist dialectics. Divorces Marianne Zoff. Completes *Man Is Man*.

1928-29

Marries actress Helene Weigel. Despite several serious relationships with other women, Brecht would remain married to her for the rest of his life. With Weill, adapts Gay's *Beggar's Opera* as *The Threepenny Opera*.

1930-32

Brecht writes *Happy End* and *The Mother*. German economy a shambles. In response, Brecht writes his "learning plays"—Marxist lessons for actors and audience: *The Measures Taken* and *The Exception and the Rule*.

1933

Nazis in power.

1933-39

Brecht and family flee Germany, "changing countries more often than shoes." Their travels take them to Czechoslovakia, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark and Finland. Writings include *Galileo*, *The Good Person of Setzuan* and *Mother Courage*.

1940-41

Writes the short story *The Augsburgers Chalk Circle* and the play *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*. Travels across America, settling in Santa Monica. Failing to find work as a screenwriter, Brecht compares Hollywood to hell.

1942-1943

With Fritz Lang, writes screenplay for *Hangmen Also Die*.

1944-45

Writes *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

1945-47

Collaborates with actor Charles Laughton on translation of *Galileo*. Laughton performs the title role in a small Hollywood theatre.

1947

Brecht summoned to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Testifies (truthfully) that he has never been a member of the Communist Party and (evasively) that he is nothing more than a writer of historical plays. Brecht leaves America for Switzerland.

1948

Brecht and Weigel work in Zurich while negotiating their return to Berlin. Adaptation: *Antigone*.

1949-53

Berliner Ensemble created. Opening production: *Mother Courage* with Weigel in the title role. Adaptations: Lenz's *Private Tutor* and Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*.

1954

Berliner Ensemble production of *Chalk Circle*.

1956

Brecht dead at age 58.