

Texas Christian University

# A Complicated Game of Dominoes

An Analysis of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* a la David Ball

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Bertolt Brecht is one of the most fascinating playwrights in twentieth century theatre—he found a way to simultaneously follow the rules, break the rules, and create new rules. In *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Brecht tells an intricate story in a fascinating way, using several of his unique strategies and theatrical elements in conjunction with some of the mainstream structural features as outlined by David Ball. In creating this odd coalescence of ideas, Brecht successfully tells the story of Grusha, Azdak, and the other characters in the play while promoting his own agendas to the audience as well.

One of the most fascinating structural features that Brecht uses to both tell his story and promote his style of theatre is his manipulation of dramatic action. Because of his creation of epic theatre and his use of the alienation effect, Brecht is known for his episodic method of storytelling that interrupts the action in order to prevent audiences from becoming too emotionally involved in the characters in the story. Brecht's adherence to these ideas can be seen clearly in the way that he manipulates dramatic action. Rather than having a simple, single line of dominoes that topple over from the initial intrusion, Brecht creates two complex lines of dominoes that begin at the intrusion and then do not reunite until the moments leading to the play's resolution. More specifically, the intrusion in the play most clearly occurs when the Governor is beheaded and the Fat Prince stages his coup, and from this intrusion two sets of dominoes begin to fall. The first deals with Grusha—the governor's beheading acts as the trigger for the heap of the Governor's Wife leaving her baby behind, which then acts as the trigger for Grusha's taking of the baby, and then the rest of her story proceeds event-by-event from there. Interestingly enough, this intrusion also serves as the first trigger for Azdak's line of dramatic action. The Governor's beheading leads to the heap of the Grand Duke escaping, and this triggers the Grand Duke's encounter with Azdak, and then Azdak's story unfolds from there. Despite this clear complexity, both of these storylines end up intersecting once again in the very

last portion of the play when Grusha appears in court before Azdak and Azdak determines the fate and true mother of Michael.

Fascinatingly, despite this unconventional approach to dramatic action, Brecht still follows all of the basic guidelines provided by Ball about dramatic action—there is a clear stasis at the beginning with the Governor in charge, there is a clear intrusion with the Governor's beheading, there is a clear stasis at the end when Azdak gives Michael to Grusha, and all of the action in between follows in a direct sequence. However, Brecht manipulates this conventional structure to his own end—by adapting the format of the play to be more episodic and less linear, he finds a way to successfully tell the story (and actually tell a more eventful story) while still incorporating his alienation effect to prevent a high amount of emotional involvement from the audience. By shifting between Grusha's and Azdak's stories halfway through the show—and at the emotional climax of Grusha's story—Brecht actually uses the typical structure of dramatic action to make his alienation effect even stronger while still telling an effective story.

A second major structural feature that Brecht uses to effectively tell a story in his own Brechtian fashion is things theatrical. One of the most obvious of his “things theatrical” is the use of the Singer or narrator. Brecht uses the Singer paradoxically to both draw attention to some of the most important moments of the play while also removing much of the emotional elements of the moment. For example, when Grusha and Simon reunite toward the end of the third scene, the Singer describes the emotions that each of them are feeling. In using the Singer—a very noticeable, different, and theatrical device that stands out to the audience and is clearly separate from real life—Brecht effectively draw attention to this big moment while also allowing the audience to view the pain in a more objective and intellectual light. Another “things theatrical” that Brecht employs is the ending of the play. Stasis returns and the play is resolved when Azdak deems Grusha to be the mother of Michael, divorces Grusha from her current marriage so that

she can marry Simon, and then turns over the Governor's Wife's previous property to the public to be made into "Azdak's Garden." This very deus-ex-machina ending serves as a sort of "things theatrical" because it provides a quick resolution to the end of the play and also allows for a happy ending for Grusha, Simon, Michael, and Azdak. The sudden nature and positive atmosphere around this ending make it stand out, and this not only draws attention to a very important plot point, but also highlights some of Brecht's own ethical and political views and paints them in a positive light. This ending serves almost as a sort of propaganda for the idea that true justice comes not from following the black-and-white rules set by the elite or by those in power, but from doing what is best for *people*. By showing Azdak as overlooking the true answer to Michael's maternity and instead deciding in favor of what Brecht would call true justice, Brecht is able to demonstrate his own ethical philosophy in a way that is prominent and noticeable within the play. Furthermore, by also mentioning how the property previously owned by the wealthy bourgeois would be turned into a garden for the people, Brecht is able to incorporate some of his socialist ideals into the work as well. A third example of "things theatrical" involves the near-execution of Azdak toward the end of the fourth scene. This scene is particularly prominent not only because several characters are watching Azdak as the Ironshirts attempt to hang him (and thus the focus and physical presence of the moment is heightened), but also because the moment itself is high in suspense and intensity for audience members. This intense theatrical moment provides a look at the cruelty of the Governor's Wife and of some of the elite members of society, and Brecht is able to highlight this cruelty potently by theatrically demonstrating how it can apply to character that the audience has become fond of. Additionally, the moment when Azdak is saved also serves as a thing theatrical because of its sudden and almost unbelievably uncanny timing, and in highlighting this moment as well, Brecht successfully draws attention to the quirky luck of Azdak. Furthermore, this moment also

reinforces Brecht's previous idea of justice—he shows that Azdak is rewarded for breaking the “law” (by saving the life of the Grand Duke) and instead doing what is right and humane.

As a whole, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is a fascinating and incredible piece of theatre that helped to invent new theatrical norms and demonstrate how the typical features of a play can be bent and adapted creatively. By using things theatrical and by putting a unique twist on the falling of dramatic action, Brecht is able to emphasize his personal ideas and agendas and to manipulate the audience to view his work in an objective and intellectual light.