



A Musical Interpretation of Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre Caucasian Chalk Circle by Mark Nichols: a Modernistic Stage Plan

Li Jia

International College, Krirk University, Thanon Ram Intra, Khwaeng Anusawari, Khet Bang Khen, Krung Thep, Maha Nakhon 10220, Thailand

Abstract

German modernist playwright Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre Caucasian Chalk Circle brought keen attention from producers and directors. Since its first professional English stage premiere in Philadelphia under the directorship of Bentley, the theater version has set its classical status as one of the most celebrated drama works. Moreover, composers also tried to add music to the original version to enhance the overall dramatic impact further. American composer Mark Nichols' soundtracks are considered one of the most successful attempts. In my interpretation of this work, the researcher would love to draw on Mark Nichols' music to interpret it in a musical genre. Even from the fact that the narrator in the original play by Brecht is a singer, we can estimate that the playwright has a very "musical" idea at the very beginning to let composers come in.

Keywords: Musical interpretation, Bertolt Brecht', Caucasian Chalk Circle, Mark Nichols

1 Introduction

German modernist playwright Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre Caucasian Chalk Circle brought keen attention from producers and directors. Since its first professional English stage premiere in Philadelphia under the directorship of Bentley, the theater version has set its classical status as one of the most celebrated drama works. In this version, the researcher plans to develop a relatively economic or minimalist performance that uses only a limited number of props and cast to maximize the dramatic impact on the viewers.

2 The Drama and Theme

The drama was set up in a small town in Russia: Grusinia, though the researcher suppose this is a fake name that one can not find on a map. The critical story tells a noble mother who threw away her child wants to claim the kid back. This put to a fierce conflict with the adoptive mother. The judge(though some critics label him as "eccentric," which is a word the researcher disagrees with), Azdak decides a Chalk Circle "game" for the two parties, which leads to his final decision to let the adoption mother keep the kid. The researcher has to point out here that the vital theme should be anchored upon the transparent social class conflict background, especially if we understand the historical background of the play that is after the Russian Revolution in 1917 that the nobles are only the ordinary social being as the poor, it is not too hard for us to understand how the poor should be laudable since the rich are nothing without the Nobility the old social system gave(Broughton al., 1991).

Text is the most straightforward way to communicate human ideas, while music(especially in songs) can solicit a more abstract sensational experience from the audience(Squiers, 2014). Pieces in the construction of lyrics, pitch, timbre, and rhythm can deliver the nuances hidden inside the original lines of the drama. The whole work came from an ancient parable from Yuan Dynasty. The original story tells a clever judge who is the real mother to an "unidentifiable" boy. Brecht masterfully based his epic on the same "logic device," but in a somewhat different social setting. The original Chinese story glorifies the strategies of the judge, while the drama puts more emphasis on 3 points: the definition of "true love," the importance of feeling comparing to biological lineage, and the social confrontation between the poor and the rich. Especially against the common sense that the rich are always the dictators in social life, in this drama, the poor and disadvantaged party won over the nobles. The researcher has to emphasize here that this point is rather revolutionary, and it follows the realism thoughts that went rampant in the latter half of European literary history.

* Corresponding author

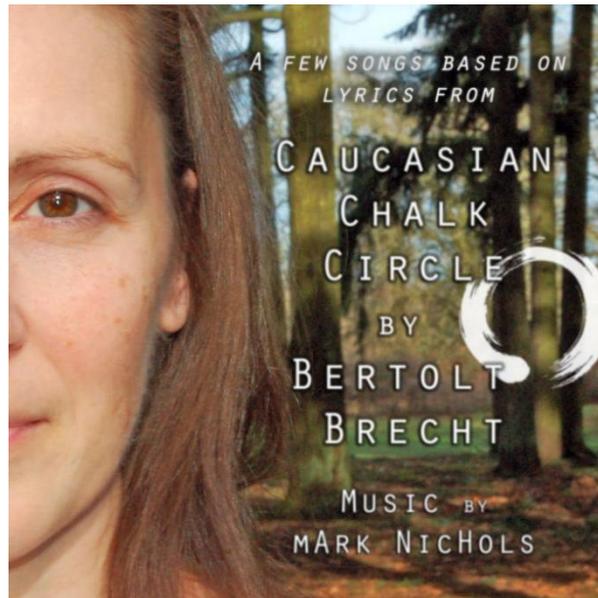
E-mail address: 1146043158@qq.com

3 The Music

the researcher would like to present the work in a Musical genre against the plain text and dialogues. Mark Nicols wrote 25 songs for the play, which is listed in diagram 1.

1.
Once Upon a Time 01:24
2.
The City is Still and Quiet - Part 1 00:47
3.
The City is Still and Quiet - Part 2 00:48
4.
Blind Man 02:03
5.
the researcher Will Have Been Waiting There 01:42
6.
And the Child Called to Her 01:49
7.
Barefoot Girl 01:19
lyrics
buy track
8.
Because She's Free (So Happy) 01:24
9.
She Runs 00:17
10.
Nobody Wants You 02:04
11.
Things Don't Always Go the Way They're Planned 00:50
12.
The Sister Was So ill 00:30
13.
Somewhere in Between 02:40
14.
The Drunken Peasant Song 00:40
15.
So Many Words Left Unsaid (The Soldier) 01:29
16.
So Many Words are Left Unsaid (Grusha) 01:29
17.
Who does Will decide the Case? 01:03
18.
Hear the Story of the Judge 00:17
19.
The Beggar A Bed 00:26
20.
Is the researcher Right? 02:22
21.
Azdak (Parts 1 thru 4) 02:14
22.
Azdak (Part 5) 00:42
23.
Never Fear the Daylight 01:14
24.
An Age of Justice 00:40
25.
Bonus - Blind Man (2012) 02:02
The song was published in his album "a few songs based on Lyrics from Caucasian Chalk Circle."

Graph 1 CD sleeve of the album "a few songs based on Lyrics from Caucasian Chalk Circle."



The overall music style is thick, orchestrated, dramatic, and dynamic. The play is set in the era of the Soviet Union, which reflects the typical device of a "play within the play." It consists of a prologue and five scenes. As an example, here, the researcher gives a sample of the song plan for the prologue and Scene one.

4 Prologue and Lyric

In the prologue part, the main issue is to lay the background between the two communes, the Collective Fruit Farm Garlinsk and the Collective Goat Farmers. After the Nazis left, the ownership of the land became a dispute between the two. The latter represents the old rich who "own" the land, and the former represents the poor who make the land productive. Here comes the Singer, who is the key figure to line up the development of the play throughout. The stage settings should be the farmland full of various fruit trees. The Singer starts with the song Once Upon a Time, telling a parable, the old story of the noble wife.

*Once upon a time
 When the blood ran like rain
 And this city was called "The city of the Damned."
 it had a governor
 His name was Georgie Abashvillthe researcher
 Once upon a time
 He was extremely rich
 He had a beautiful wife
 He had a healthy little baby
 And a wonderful life
 Once upon a time*

5 Scene One The Noble Child

The first scene focuses on the introduction of the three key figures of the parable: the Fat prince Arsen Kazbeki, the noble child Michael and the heroine Grusha Vashnadze. After the Husband was beheaded, the rich wife showed nothing for the loss and followed the new lover to flee away and left the kid to her maid, Grusha. Here the researcher would like to emphasize the cold-blondness of the rich wife and the real person with compassion who put the head of her old master to rest in the mountains. Bracht left several cues for the songs to come in to highlight the sharp contrast.

The setting is in front of the church where the noble Husband was beheaded while his wife is planning the "love trip" with her new lover Simon. Singer brings first the songs the city is still and quiet part 1 and part 2, indicates a very gloomy scene of revolution and a bloody killing.

*The city is still and quiet
 Pigeons strut in the churchyard square
 A soldier of the palace guard is loitering there*

*He's joking with a kitchen maid
As she comes up from the river with a bundle.*

Outside the church, the people celebrated over the revolution and mocked the beheaded Husband as Blind Man. The chorus comes with the song the Blind Man, drinking over the head of the governor on the pallor of the church.

*Look at you, Blind Man; you're walking tall like God
Taller than the bent-back throng
Sure of hired fists, sure of all your power
Your might has lasted long
But long is not forever, forever's much too long*

Scene Two and Three: Flight into the North Mountains/in the Northern mountains

Here come the wives of the revolutionary army. They sing the song the researcher *will have been waiting here* to encourage their husbands' braveness in the battle. They hold bottles of wine and meat to feed the men. The song leads the audience to the next Scene.

*Go calmly into battle now
Your bloody bitter battle
From which so few return
But you'll come back the researcher know you will
On a day, a day so fair,
You'll come riding over the hill to where*

Basically, the researcher will use a combination of outside actors and classmates for the play. Outside professionals will take the lead roles while classmates will take as general public and group work.

6 Stage Plan

In this sense, the researcher would love to design the overall cast as in table 1

Musicians:1 small orchestra,1 4-piece rock band(drum,bass,guitar and keyboard),1 Chorus.The full score is readily downloadable at Mark Nichols' s Official website <http://www.thereallybig.com/marks.htm#ccc>.

Cast: the Singer-Arkadthe researcher TCHEiDSE, The Rich Wife, Simon(the Lover and Army Commander), the revolutionary army and their wives(15 people in all). The researcher will direct each details person to person. The physical relationship on stage should follow a balance /contrast between intensity and sparsity. The stage curtain will be a good device to change the Scene, and the two sides of the stage are big enough to accommodate smooth entrances and exits.

7 Scene Revision

The researcher will re-engineer the storyline into four scenes of confrontation instead of the original five scenes. The rich wife and her servant Grusha are the focus of the whole play. Here is my version; the researcher would like to highlight the contrast between these two people from completely different social backgrounds. Overall, the rich and noble are portrayed as irresponsible, mean, and cowardly, and the poor are heroic, passionate, and loving. The researcher will focus on the key scenes in contrasting them .in the first Scene, after the noble Husband was beheaded by the People, these two figures show completely different attitudes towards the same man. The rich wife will follow a prearranged trip with her lover-the leader of the old army in a rather careless manner and even do not think of how to put the body of her Husband, while Grusha, against all the difficulties and dangers, sneaks into the square in the midnight and bury the remnants of her old master in the high mountains to rest in peace. Such contrast also is showcased in their different way towards kinship, the Boy Micheal. The rich wife simply leaves him to the janitor as a burden, from whom Grusha picks up and risks her life to protect him as "her boy." Also, the different attitudes towards "love" are an important component in making such class contrast stand out. During the "trip towards love," the rich wife felt bored with the lover and has an affair with one of her bodyguards, whom she finds very 'interesting." However, Grusha keeps her promise to wait for her lover Simon to come back from the war. The third confrontation scene arrives in front of the judge, while the judge uses the circle to determine who should be the mother for the boy; their different acts lead to the judge's decision to let Grusha keeps the boy. Here the researcher has to point out, in contrast to the original Chinese version in which the biological mother wins over, in this play, the real care outplays the blood heredity, which is a rather revolutionary idea hidden in the author's thoughts. The last Scene contrasts between the ending of the two women: Grusha keeps the boy and inherits the wealth from his Noble status under the law, and also she waits back her lover Simon and happy marriage; the rich wife is discovered her wrong deeds committed before the revolution and is sentenced by the judge to be the lifetime servant to the Grusha family.

8 Staging

The staging aspect will use a minimalism style to maximize the space relationship and prop usage. Stage space is not only a useful physical space for actors to perform but also an aesthetic space for aesthetic perception through Symbolization. As "text drama" gradually gives way to "theater drama," more and more attention has been paid to stage space, including both creators and audiences. In his 1968 book *Empty Space*, British director Peter Brooke has explained this concept very clearly. "We finally realize that the absence of scenery in Elizabethan drama is one of its greatest freedoms."

All the props in the play are linen, rope, bucket, cross, and flashlight. The original script involves many spaces on the stage. At the beginning of the opening, the actors stood, pinched the corners of the linen cloth with both hands, and created the governor's residence with the drooping linen cloth. The shaking bridge was created with the bucket. The river when Grusha and Simon met is created by Grucher and Simon, each holding one end of two hemp ropes. They shake the ropes. A turbulent river is creatively presented on the stage. With the change of mood, the rhythm of the two actors shaking the rope also changes, which "externalizes" their emotion on the stage. The cross stands out as a special symbolic representation that denotes "faith," and the researcher plan to put it throughout the story, like the cross on the Grusha's neck and the cross under which the circle is drawn. The flashlight gives the necessary illumination to highlight the facial expression of the actors.

9 The Performance Guide

The play heavily relies on the action or movements of the actors since a minimum number of the cast will be employed. All in all, only six actors are used. The rich wife, Grusha, Judge, Farmer, Simon, and Singer the narrator." In the construction of stage space, the play also relies on physical performance, and the physical performance often complements the use of props to complete the creation of stage space. The governor's residence created with sagging linen at the beginning of the opening is the result of joint action of body performance and props. Two people stand together, symbolizing the two doors. When someone comes in, their positions change, just like when we usually push the door. At the same time, two people represent two doors, which also shows the luxury of the governor's residence. In Scene two, Grusha is holding the baby, begging for milk from the farmers. The farmer closed the door before he heard what Grusha said. Knocking and closing the door repeatedly is an important action to show Grusha's hard experience. The actor who plays the role of the door wraps his mouth with the linen cloth and holds the two corners of the linen cloth. When the linen cloth is raised to just cover his face, it means to close the door. When the linen cloth is moved down to cover his waist, it means to open the door. After the actor who plays the door, another actor plays the farmer. The farmer's hands pass through the arms of the actor who plays the door so that the audience can see them. When the farmer communicates with Grusha, the actor who plays the door talks, and the actor who plays the farmer signs. When closing the door, the farmer takes his hands back from between his arms, and the actor who plays the door raises the linen cloth to cover his face. In this way, the interior and exterior are presented in a flexible way, which makes the audience refreshing.

10 Conclusion

As previously stated, the researcher would like to present the whole play in a musical genre, using songs as the main device to highlight the key themes of the play. The play is set against the historical background of the end of World War Two. The dispute between the ownership of land and legacy is the key issue here. The principle can be applied to solve modern international problems or disputes such as South China Sea issue between China and Neighboring countries. The overall feeling is sarcastic, passionate, and sharp. The audience is schoolmates and the general public as well, and the researcher would like to stage it in School Auditorium. The researcher wants them to feel the dramatic power of music in presenting key themes. The narrative power of music will encourage them to think about the storyline through lyrics and stage actions. Even after they finish watching, they can still leave behind melodies somehow. The key lines like Once Upon a Time can be a deep imprint for them to remember. Every set /scene will be anchored on the most striking episode of each Scene per se, such as the farmland for Scene One and Church Square with the Husband's head on Pallor in Scene Two. The costume should be in line with the historical background, the end of WWII. The researcher would like to use upfront lighting with a grading system to control the overall effect on stage, a movable lighting system to follow the main characters, and a smoky machine to bring about the effect of esotericism in certain Scene (for example, in Scene One when Simon came to find Grusha to leave her the kid and give her the silver cross).

REFERENCES

- Brough, Neil; Kavanagh, R. J. (1991). "But who is Azdak? The main source of Brecht's *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis*". *Neophilologus*. **75**: 573 – 580. doi:[10.1007/BF00209897](https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00209897).
- Squiers, Anthony (2014). *An Introduction to the Social and Political Philosophy of Bertolt Brecht: Revolution and Aesthetics*. Amsterdam: Rodopi. p. 190. ISBN [9789042038998](https://www.isbn-international.org/product/9789042038998).