

Directing *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*

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**Abstract**

Directing *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*

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This thesis is an attempt to document and reflect on the process of directing a production of Bertolt Brecht's play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, in a translation by Alistair Beaton, as a culminating project in my Master's training in Directing at the University of Washington's School of Drama. *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* was produced by The School of Drama in The Meany Hall Studio Theatre and ran from November 2, 2024 through November 10, 2024. This paper includes analysis of the play, discussions of the collaborative process with designers and actors, and consideration of how key ideas evolved over the course of the production process, as well as reflections on my personal development as a director and artist.

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## Directorial Goals

As I reflect on my three years of graduate school and my artistic practice leading up to my graduate studies, I find myself thinking a lot about my choice to be a theater artist. Of all the mediums and artistic forms I could have chosen, what drew me to commit my life to making theater? I think the answer lies in the special electricity that I feel in the presence of live theatrical events. I have always been fascinated by the relationships, connections, and interactions that are forged at the theater — not just the relationships between performers on stage, but the relationships that are built between audience members and performers, and the relationships that are built between fellow audience members.

As I consider the rapidly shifting world around me and wrestle with the problems we face, I find myself wondering how theater can contribute to actually making the world a better place: How can the art I make engage with the conversation, shift people's thinking, and ultimately effect change for the better? I believe that live performance has a unique potential to address the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In an increasingly digital and disconnected world, live performance asks all of us to embrace presence and participation. I believe that many of our most urgent problems are collective one: How do we balance the needs of individuals against the needs of the group? How can we begin to address systemic issues when we can't even engage in productive dialogue? Ultimately, as a society, what do we owe each other?

These are not simple questions with easy answers, but I have a sense that the way forward lies in the practices of intentional presence and participation. We need to learn to be present with the tension between opposing ideas and to participate in the difficult work of

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resolving those tensions. I strive to make work that challenges us to reflect on where we are failing as a community and inspires to move forward together.

My choice to stage *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is rooted in these political and aesthetic interests. For me, Brecht’s play is all about the collective experience. This is an epically theatrical “play within a play” that wrestles with the question of how we as a community can take care of each other. I see a story that pits the optimistic notion that an individual’s sacrifices can make a difference for the greater good against the pragmatic reality that real change won’t be possible until the collective commits itself to the difficult work of radical structural change.

In approaching the play as my culminating thesis project I had several goals in mind:

**Philosophically**, I hoped that the production could inspire reflection and action in audiences who came to see it. I believe the play is not only relevant, but urgent. In reflecting on the script during my pre-production preparation, I realized that Brecht’s play puts me in an uncomfortable position: On the one hand, I agree with his proposals about the sacrifices we must make — individually and collectively — to make the world a better place. On the other, I’m confronted by my own complacency, by my failures to make a sacrifice for the greater good, and by my lazy refusal to critically consider how I decide what is right and what is wrong. This discomfort reflects a failure of my actions to live up to my ideals. I believed that a well-produced production of the play would challenge audience members in the same way and inspire reflection on how we as a community could work together to take care of each other.

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**Aesthetically**, I am dedicated to directing productions that celebrate liveness and take advantage of the unique theatrical possibilities of communal experience in shared time and shared space. I am skeptical of theatrical performance that leans into aesthetics which might be served just as well — or even better — by the mediums of television or film. In dreaming up this production, my intention was to create a show that would not only clearly and entertainingly stage Brecht’s story, but also use communal audience experience, immersive techniques, and spectacular theatrical design not only to engage and delight audiences but to further illuminate the challenging, inspirational ideas in the play.

**Educationally**, my hope was to incorporate and synthesize the large toolbox of skills and techniques that I have honed as a student in the School of Drama. In many ways, this thesis production was an opportunity to integrate the craft and artistry I have refined as a master’s student with the still messy realities of my passion, my mission, and my taste.

Given these three primary goals, a production of a Bertolt Brecht play seemed to be a fitting thesis project. While I am not a scholar or historian of Brecht, his writings — and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in particular — have influenced and stimulated me since I first encountered his work as an undergraduate. As a contemporary artist considering Brecht’s legacy as a playwright, director, and theorist, I am inspired by his consistent efforts to fuse carefully considered storytelling and dramaturgy with innovative theatrical experiments.

Central to my understanding of Brecht’s work is his concept of the “*Verfremdungseffekt*” — his term for techniques that seek to interrupt naturalistic staging in order to confront the audience with the constructed, presentational nature of the theatrical production. In doing so, the theater artist helps to “make the strange familiar and the familiar strange,” inspiring the audience

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to reexamine things they take for granted or consider things they have never considered before. Most relevantly to Brecht's artistic project as a Marxist playwright, the *Verfremdungseffekt* can serve to remind audiences that the society they live in is constructed by people — just like the play they are watching — and like everything constructed by people, it could be changed.

I believe that the *Verfremdungseffekt* is connected to the ideas of presence and participation that I mentioned before. A group of artists works together to craft a theatrical moment that exists only in a specific moment of shared time and space. They present this moment to the audience that has chosen to be present and asks them to participate in an act of collective imagination. This is an active, collaborative process. In the best of all worlds, this process can produce profound results: not just, "Imagine, if you will, that these folding tables are the doors of a castle," but also, "Imagine, if you will, what it would mean if people stood up to power."

Brecht was a showman at heart and a lover of cabaret, comedy, circus, and other popular entertainments. He used music, spectacle, and design elements to draw in and entertain audiences as much as to alienate them. *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* was written during his exile in the United States and was inspired by the dramaturgy of American Broadway musicals, Hollywood cinema, and other popular forms. Brecht hoped to bend these entertaining and engaging genres towards radical ends.

One of the major challenges in staging the play today is ensuring that its themes and messages resonate with a contemporary audience. In the 80-odd years since its composition, our world has changed culturally, politically, and aesthetically. Brecht was known to say, "the proof

of the pudding is in the eating.” In other words, at the end of the day, it’s not about academic theory: it’s about how the audience responds to the show.

With all this in mind, I set out to create a production that would:

- Embrace theatricality and the special power of communal live performance
- Employ rigorous craft in staging, shaping performances, and collaborating with actors and designers
- Apply and reappropriate Brecht’s techniques and aesthetics

In order to:

- Clearly tell Brecht’s provocative and inspirational story
- Entertain and engage a contemporary audience
- Inspire critical thinking, internal reflection, and political action

## **The Play**

### **The Story of the Play**

Brecht’s play is the story of a community of neighbors trying to figure out how to make a difficult decision. They stage a new version of an ancient legend: the story a woman in an uncaring world who decides to sacrifice everything to care for an innocent child. When her fate is placed in the hands of judge who is willing to bend the rules in favor of the powerless, but has

always looked after himself first, she inspires him to give up his power to do the right thing not just for the child, but for the entire community.

## **Prologue**

In a prologue set in Soviet Georgia in the immediate aftermath of WWII, two neighboring collectivist farming villages come together to resolve the question of who should own a disputed valley. The goat farmers have historically lived on the contested land but were forced to leave during the war. They want to return to their beloved homeland because even though their new territory is just as good for grazing goats, they miss their home. The fruit farmers propose to annex the valley and invest in irrigation technology to increase the productivity of the land — which will benefit everyone in this utopian communistic society. The goat farmers agree to cede the valley to the fruit farmers in the interest of the greater good. In celebration of their just and amicable collective decision, the fruit farming village presents a performance of a play: the ancient “Parable of the Chalk Circle”.

## **Act One: The Noble Child**

The medieval Kingdom of Grusinia: On Easter Sunday, The Governor of Nukha (the capital city) and his Wife present their infant son Michael to the people for the first time. Grusha (a palace kitchen maid) helps prepare for the Easter banquet — and flirts with her love interest Simon (a soldier in the palace guard). Dissatisfied with the Grand Duke’s handling of the ongoing war with Iran, nobleman Prince Kazbeki organizes a coup d’état. The Grand Duke is deposed, and the Governor is beheaded. As rioting threatens to overtake the city, the palace

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servants prepare for the escape of the Governor’s Wife and her entourage. Simon is ordered to accompany the Governor’s Wife, but before he leaves, he proposes to Grusha. She promises to remain faithful until his return. The Governor’s Wife frantically scrambles to bring as many of her precious garments as she can until she realizes with a shock that the city is on fire. She flees with The Adjutant, abandoning Michael. The servants prepare for their own escape, and a nurse sticks Grusha with the abandoned baby. Against her better judgement and the advice of her peers, Grusha decides to save the baby — setting off for her brother’s farm in the mountains.

**Act Two: The Flight into the Northern Mountains**

Grusha struggles to provide for the child on her journey — haggling to buy him milk and attempting to pass herself off as a rich lady to blend in with escaping aristocrats at a coaching inn. She eventually leaves Michael on the doorstep of a farmer and his wife, but when she discovers that bloodthirsty soldiers have come looking for the child, she resorts to violence to protect the baby and adopts him as her own. She risks her life (and his) to cross a broken footbridge across a ravine and spirit the baby to safety.

**Act Three: In the Northern Mountains**

Sick and weary from travel, Grusha arrives at the home of her brother Lavrenti, but her suspicious sister-in-law refuses to allow her and Michael to stay past the spring thaw. Lavrenti concocts a plan: Grusha can marry Jussup (a farmer on his deathbed). This will provide a home and livelihood for Grusha and establish a father “on paper” for Michael, concealing his noble birth. Grusha is reluctant to break her promise to Simon, but having no other option, she agrees.

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Lavrenti drops Grusha and Michael off at Jussup's home and pays a fee to Jussup's mother. Uninvited neighbors arrive and throw a raucous wedding/funeral party in Jussup's home, which is interrupted by news that the war with Iran is over. Jussup stands up from bed, revealing that he was not actually terminally ill but in fact malingering to dodge the draft.

Time passes, and Michael grows into a toddler. Grusha resists the advances of her new husband, but when her fiancé Simon returns, she confesses that she is no longer free to marry him. Grusha tries to explain that the child is not the result of infidelity, but before she can make Simon understand, soldiers arrive, capturing the child. Grusha claims him as her own and she is arrested for kidnapping.

#### **Act Four: The Story of the Judge**

In a flashback to the day of the Prince's coup, we learn how Azdak (village scribe, intellectual agitator, and scoundrel poacher) unwittingly sheltered the escaping Grand Duke. When he realizes what he has done, Azdak tries to turn himself in for crimes against the revolution, believing that the new regime will be a just and democratic government of the people. To his shock and horror, he discovers that the soldiers are loyal to the aristocrats, not the cause of the oppressed workers. Prince Kazbeki arrives and asks the soldiers to elect his nephew as a new judge. Azdak proposes a mock trial to test the nephew's abilities. Azdak outwits the Fat Prince's nephew, turning the soldiers against him and inspiring them to elect Azdak as the new judge. In his new position as a judge, Azdak has the power to put his finger on the scale of justice in favor of the downtrodden. He takes bribes, carouses, and indulges his vices while also finding ways to punch up against the rich and powerful, apparently operating within their laws,

but twisting them to benefit the powerless and score payback against the upper classes. When the Grand Duke (and the Governor's Wife) return to power, Azdak knows the jig is up. He grovels at the feet of The Governor's Wife, swearing he'll restore her custody of the child and have Grusha beheaded for her crimes.

### **Act Five: The Chalk Circle**

On the day of Grusha's trial, Azdak is accused of insurrection by rich farmers he ruled against as a judge. He is captured and tortured by soldiers loyal to the new regime. Before he can be executed, a message arrives from The Grand Duke declaring that the village scribe who harbored him when he escaped the coup will be the new judge, and Azdak is ironically reinstated. During initial arguments, Azdak seems sympathetic to the arguments of The Governor's Wife and her lawyers, but Grusha confronts Azdak, shaming him for acting as an instrument of the unjust forces of power. Azdak declares his decision will be determined by the "Test of the Chalk Circle": whoever can pull the boy out of a circle of chalk will prove herself the true mother of the child. Grusha refuses to pull — unwilling to harm Michael even if it means losing the boy she loves. Azdak declares Grusha the true mother, grants a divorce so that she can marry Simon, and declares the Governor's lands will be turned into a children's playground. He encourages Grusha and Michael to get out of town and flees himself, fearing the retribution of the new regime.

### **Themes**

- This is a play about a community trying to figure out how to take care of each other.

- When we think that there isn't enough to go around, we fight to hold on to what we have. How can, we as a community, transform what we have into what we need?
- When something needs to be done, when there is not enough to go around, who do we expect step up and make a sacrifice?
- What is *real* justice? Who gets to decide?
- Individual Sacrifice (doing what you can on your own) vs. Collective Revolution (working together to change the system)
- Naiveté about the grim reality of the world vs. cynicism about the real possibility of change

## Core Action

The play is about a community trying **To Turn What They Have into What They Need**. In a world where resources are slim and needs are great, the characters need to use ingenuity, grit, and collaboration to make do — and to turn what they have into what they need.

This phrase names a playable action which links the story of the prologue's land dispute to the stories of Grusha and Azdak — and resonates with the theatrical reality of the ensemble working together to make theater magic out of mundane materials.

In my earliest thinking about the play, my focus was on the action of sacrifice. Grusha makes a series of sacrifices to care for Michael and then eventually she convinces Azdak to sacrifice his power as a judge to do the right thing. Along the way, we encounter various characters who do or don't make a sacrifice. While this analysis still resonates with my thinking about the play, the shift to focus on the community trying to work together to turn what they

have into what they need broadened the scope of the story to level of the entire community, which I understand as the heart of the play. This is not an anodyne fable about how individuals can make noble sacrifices to save the world, nor is it a cautionary tale about how only when we all join in revolution will change be possible. Rather, it is a story that wrestles with the question of how communities and individuals decide what to do when it feels like there isn't enough to go around. Over the course of the play, we encounter different perspectives on this question, and we are challenged to hold them in tension or synthesize them in order to find the way forward.

## **The Structure of the Play**

The play has several unique and notable structural features. Some of these are characteristic of Brecht's milieu, and others are specific to *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

### **The Prologue**

In Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, the first scene is a prologue (or "vorspiel"). Two neighboring communities debate the best use of a contested piece of land and then come to a consensus decision to resolve the conflict. After the decision has been made and agreed to by all, the fruit farmers announce that in honor of visiting delegates they have arranged for a performance of a play "which has some bearing on our problem." The play will feature the famous Georgian singer Arkadi Cheidze, who has traveled especially for the occasion.

This prologue scene serves as a framing device for the rest of the play, which functions as a "play within a play", with Arkadi Cheidze serving as The Singer (and, in the iconic Berliner Ensemble production, playing the role of Azdak as well.) Dramaturgically, this weaves Brecht's

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Verfremdungseffekt into the fabric of the play — ensuring that the audience is constantly aware that the story of Grusha, Azdak, and Michael is a presented story, staged by actors who have a specific political “problem” in mind and a point of view on how the story relates to it.

The prologue also functions as a mirror for the themes illustrated by the conflict over whether Grusha or the Governor's Wife is the “true mother” of the noble child. The Governor's Wife's claim is based in blood. According to both law and custom, we lean on biological relationship to determine custody, but The Governor's Wife is portrayed as irresponsible, cruel, and selfish — abandoning Michael and only seeking to reclaim her status as his mother when doing so will allow her to regain ownership of her deceased husband's estate. On the other hand, Grusha has no biological, formal, or legal claim to Michael, but she is depicted as caring and nurturing. Over the course of the play, she makes constant sacrifices to provide for him at great personal cost. These circumstances are carefully crafted to ensure that the audience's sympathies lie with Grusha.

In contrast, the problem of the prologue paints the goat farmers as the sympathetic party: they have been displaced from their ancestral homeland and long to return home. Brecht takes the time to underscore these extremely relatable sentiments: As the expert explains, “Comrades, why does one love one's country? Because the bread tastes better there, the sky is higher, the air smells better, voices sound stronger, the ground is easier to walk on. Isn't that so?”. Their new land is just as functional for the work of raising goats, but they hold a deep-seated love for the land where they grew up, the land that has belonged to them “for centuries”. The fruit farmers' proposal is based only on productivity: they will be able to increase their yield of fruit and even

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begin producing wine if they annex the valley and invest in irrigating it, but they have no other claim to the ownership of the land.

The goat farmers are analogous to the Governor’s Wife in that they have the traditional claim to ownership for the land. The fruit farmers are analogous to Grusha, since they protected the disputed valley during the Nazi occupation after the goat farmers were forced to abandon it. The key difference is in the sympathetic circumstances: the goat farmers have suffered the most, and sentimental audiences likely hope that they will be able to return to their homeland. Of course, in both the prologue and the play within the play, the decision is not made based on who has a customary claim to ownership or who has suffered the most. In either case, the ultimate decision of ownership is made according to the logic of The Singer’s moral: “Everything belongs by right to those who care for it.” The difference lies in our emotional investment in the losing party. The Governor’s Wife is portrayed as a villain to be defeated by the hero Grusha, but the goat farmers are portrayed as displaced refugees longing to return to the land they love. By juxtaposing the story of the noble child against the story of the disputed valley, Brecht challenges his audience to consider the play’s questions of ownership, collective responsibility, and the greater good, *intellectually rather than emotionally*. This structural device encourages us to consider not just what we think is right but consider why we think so — to develop our rubric for how we should decide.

Notably, the prologue was never presented in English in Brecht’s lifetime. The play’s premiere was a 1948 production presented at Carlton College in Northfield, Minnesota with an English translation by Eric Bentley. Due to the increasingly hostile anti-Soviet and anti-Communist atmosphere of the United States, Brecht instructed Bentley to omit the prologue.

While the story of the goat framers and fruit farmers was later restored in published English-language editions of the play and was utilized in Brecht's 1954 production with the Berliner Ensemble, many productions in the decades since have chosen to cut the prologue.

### **The Narrator**

The framing device of the prologue establishes the device of the “play within a play”, and the use of The Singer as a non-diegetic narrator reinforces it by constantly interrupting the audience's immersion into the more realistic drama of Grusha and Azdak's story with exposition, analysis, and commentary. The Singer addresses the audience directly and serves as a mouthpiece for the playwright, allowing Brecht to highlight his political point of view on the action. Brecht also uses The Singer to provide access to the inner thoughts of characters — most crucially in Act Five in The Singer's song introduced with the line, “Hear now what this angry woman thought but did not say.”

### **The Moral**

Brecht's script does not feature an epilogue or bookend that explicitly returns to the frame of the collective farmers. Their story is tidily resolved in his prologue. Rather than show how the goat farmers and fruit farmers respond to the story, Brecht has the singer address the play's moral directly to the audience, using illustrative examples that link the images of mothers raising children, ranchers caring for livestock, and agriculturists tending to the land together to support his general theme:

But you who've heard the tale

Of the chalk circle  
Remember the wisdom of the ages:  
That everything  
Belongs by right to those who  
Care for it:  
Children to the motherly  
So that the children thrive.  
Horses to good horsemen  
So that the horses thrive  
And the earth to good farmers  
So that the earth may thrive.

The inclusion of a didactic moral draws from the tradition of parables or instructive stories for children. It serves as a final *Verfremdungseffekt*, landing the play as a composed story with a strong point of view instead of letting the audience leave the theater transported by Grusha, Michael, and Simon's happy ending.

## **Episodic Structure**

In keeping with his vision for Epic rather than Aristotelian theater, Brecht employs an episodic structure, telling the story of the play through a series of self-contained episodes. This is especially obvious in Act Two, in which Grusha encounters a series of distinct obstacles in her journey up into the mountains, and in Act Four, in which we learn how Azdak becomes judge and then see him preside over a series of court cases.

## **Grusha and Azdak**

We can also see juxtaposition at play in the choice to focus on two seemingly separate storylines which eventually collide in the climax of Act Five. (As the singer explains in Brecht's prologue "It is actually two stories.")

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Grusha — the protagonist of Acts One, Two, and Three — has a naïve streak. While she knows that saving baby Michael is not the wisest idea, she gives in to the temptation to save him, severely underestimating the amount of trouble her choice will cause for her. She does not set out to stage a revolution, she merely acts selflessly to save Michael without fully understanding the suffering she will bring upon herself. In his notes on the play, Brecht described her as a “sucker” who cannot resist “the seductive power of goodness.”

Azdak —the protagonist of Act Four — is far more cynical. He is an intellectual who holds revolutionary ideals, but he is also a scoundrel who poaches rabbits and commits other petty crimes. When the coup that overthrows The Grand Duke does not lead to a government of the people but instead to a new authoritarian and unjust regime, Azdak’s idealism is challenged. He is offered a position of power in the new regime and chooses to use it to his own advantage. While he does place his thumb on the scale to find in favor of the poor and downtrodden, the logical justifications behind his judgements do not seem fair and just so much as chaotic, capricious, and vengeful. He also pursues selfish ends, including soliciting bribes, drinking booze, and taking advantage of Ludovica.

Grusha and Azdak function as foils in dialectical counterpoint. Grusha is overly naïve in her belief that individuals can simply “do the right thing” in an unjust world. Azdak is overly cynical in his belief that individuals need to look out for themselves and not risk sticking their necks out until a collective revolution reforms society. The message of the play lies in this juxtaposition, challenging audiences to take up the responsibility of doing the right thing in an unjust world while also recognizing the need for collective action to reform that unjust world.

## Selecting a Translation

After resolving to direct *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, it was necessary to choose an English translation. I considered several different translations of the play for our production, reviewing English versions of the play by Eric Bentley, James and Tania Stern (with lyrics by W.H. Auden), Ralph Manheim, and Thulani Davis/William R. Spiegelberger. Of these, Alistair Beaton’s translation stood out as especially clear and contemporary, with several of the more confusing aspects of Brecht’s story clarified for 21<sup>st</sup> century ears and sensibilities. He also makes some judicious cuts to the play, helping to keep the runtime more manageable without sacrificing key aspects of the story. (Excised material includes one of the trials from Act Four, the scene where Michael and other children in the mountains playact a pretend execution of the governor, and the reappearance in Act Five of The Sergeant who Grusha attacks to save Michael.)

Beaton’s translation uses a variety of language styles and registers, including free verse, structured rhyming verse, and prosaic (sometimes even crass) dialogue. Beaton is British, and there are a number characteristically British slang terms and idioms that are not commonly used in the United States (e.g. “flatfoot”, “bottled it”, “backhander”, and “arse.”) The playwright also uses language to differentiate class. Notably, the Grand Duke uses a very posh manner of speaking — referring to himself in the third person and using words like “chap” and “poppycock”.

Unlike other translators, Beaton makes the choice to refer to Grusinia’s military foe/neighbor as “Iran” rather than “Persia”.

The most notable deviation from a literal translation of Brecht’s play is in the prologue. In his Translator’s Note, Beaton explains “I have made some fundamental alterations to the prologue (which is sometimes found to be so problematical for modern audiences that it is simply not performed).” Rather than the story of two Soviet collectives debating who will make the best use of a disputed valley, Beaton’s prologue presents the residents of “a war-torn village in an under-developed country.” An expert from the “International Development and Reconstruction Commission” explains that the “land should go to whoever can make best use of it. That’s in all our interests. Isn’t it?” but the villagers insist that they won’t be deciding anything until they stage a play “about who owns what and why”.

This version of the prologue maintains the presentational play-within-a-play device of the original, but it removes the element of a sympathetic community agreeing to give up their land for the greater good. Instead, it pits a well-meaning but ineffectual expert against skeptical villagers and does not depict the resolution of their conflict. Unlike Brecht’s prologue, which makes clear which decision is “right”, the Beaton prologue leaves the question open, leaving us leaning in favor of the downtrodden villagers.

## **Process: Initial Design Meetings**

One of my earliest hunches was that the world of our production should be contemporary rather than historical. As I considered how best to render the structural elements of the “play within a play”, the narrator, and Brecht’s other fourth wall breaking techniques, it felt important that we embrace the idea that the audience was literally present in the same place and time as the

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performers. Even though the story being told is set in the Middle Ages, it seemed vital that we tell it in a way that was immediately accessible for a contemporary audience in Seattle, WA. I also hoped that the design of the show could be playful, surprising, and colorful to support the goal of an entertaining, engaging, and spectacular production. This too felt in the spirit of Brecht, who believed in the power of popular entertainment forms. An entertaining and spectacular production would capture audience attention and lure in skeptics who might be suspicious of Brecht’s gloomy reputation.

Based on my analysis of the prologue’s structural effect, I was keen to find a way to incorporate this gesture into our production, but I determined that the “fundamental alterations” that Beaton made to his version of Brecht’s prologue undermined its function as an episode illustrating how the right decision might involve people who have already suffered giving something up for the greater good. I considered seeking the rights to a more literal translation of Brecht’s prologue, but suspected that a 2025 audience would struggle to buy into the premise that the Soviet Union was a place where resources were fairly allocated and the needs of all were met. The length and pacing of Brecht’s prologue would also be an obstacle for a contemporary audience, particularly when it serves as the opening episode of an already long and intricately structured play, without an obvious link to the play’s plotting.

With these goals in mind, I prepared for my early meetings with the core production design team: Duma Du (sets), Xiaoyan Yu (costumes), and Peter Maradudin (lights). In our early conversations, I shared my thoughts on the show’s story, themes, and style and we explored a variety of visual references including formal and informal community gathering spaces, images

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from 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Soviet and Communist societies, Christmas Pageants and other non-professional performances, and various “fake”, “artificial”, and “presentational” artworks.

In these early meetings we resolved to prioritize clarity and metaphor over historical accuracy or verisimilitude. We agreed on a goal that an audience member should be able to look at a character and know right away whether this person was a soldier, a beggar, or a king. In other words, we decided to choose clarity over cohesive logic or historical accuracy. We discussed using whatever tools were at our disposal to make this happen, even if that meant that some design gestures would be more symbolic or iconic and others would be more historical and representational.

We also discussed how we might reimagine the prologue of the play. As I began to think about what a contemporary equivalent of the meeting in Brecht’s prologue might be, I found myself thinking about New England town meetings. I grew up in New Hampshire, where local government is still handled via the town meeting. In the New England town meeting, citizens gather on a specific day, everyone gets a chance to speak their piece into the microphone, and decisions are eventually made via majority vote.

In our earliest conversations we imagined creating our own version of the prologue where neighbors at a community center would debate a proposal to give up something that they loved, something that was “rightfully theirs”, for the greater good. One idea we discussed would feature an under-resourced neighborhood with marginalized residents considering a proposal to turn their community park into a much-needed homeless shelter. This would mirror Brecht’s goat farmers by depicting people who have suffered agreeing to give up something because it would serve the greater need.

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I found some exciting research of Vermont town meetings taking place in repurposed school gymnasiums. These images resonated strongly with the central action of a community working together to turn what they have into what they need, since they depicted neighbors embracing and transforming an imperfect multipurpose space to serve the needs of their meeting. The idea of adults operating in a youthful space also felt like a fertile environment for the theater magic and imaginative transformation our production concept called for.



*Figure 1 Huntington, VT Town Meeting (Redjar)*



*Figure 2 Putney, VT Town Meeting (O'Connor)*

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Based on these conversations, Duma found references images of a Seattle community center with a high-school-style hybrid gymnasium/auditorium with basketball hoops and a stage (a “gym-a-torium”). She created her preliminary scenic design based on this research. We imagined that our props and costume pieces might be found objects from a school or community center setting. We also discussed video as a possible element in our world, inspired by Brecht’s use of projected slides and the common sight of power point presentations in our visual research of town hall meetings.

In addition to the group meetings, I met one-on-one with Sara Walsh, professor of Scenic Design, who generously signed on to serve as the puppet designer and director for the show. Based on the significant role that Michael plays in the story, the obvious logistical challenges of working with real children, and the rich Verfremdungseffekt possibilities of puppetry, a puppet Michael felt like an appropriate choice. In our early conversations, Sara and I agreed on the importance of our puppet following the same rules of the world that governed our scenic, prop, and costume logic. Given the idea of a community turning what they have into what they need, it seemed that Michael should not be represented by a realistic puppet or plastic baby doll but should instead be some sort of thematically significant found object. During these early stages Sara also lead a puppetry workshop with the MFA acting students who would make up the majority of our ensemble to build their skills, ascertain their strengths, and begin to imagine how we might bring Michael to life. We resolved to keep thinking until we found the perfect idea.

## **Process: Prologue Workshop**

After conversation with my project advisor Valerie Curtis-Newton about the feasibility of rewriting Brecht's prologue for a contemporary situation, we determined that it would not be realistic to seek permission for such an ambitious idea with the time available for our process. When we secured the rights to the play and Alistair Beaton's translation, we received permission to cut the prologue from our production. I decided that rather than use Beaton's prologue or pulling in a more literal translation of Brecht's original prologue, we would instead stage a "preshow sequence" which would serve as our production's house speech, establish the rules of engagement for our audience, and fulfil some of the same structural functions of Brecht's prologue. We decided that since this would be a preshow and not part of the play per se, the actors would play (versions of) themselves rather than fictional characters in a specific neighborhood or community.

I worked with the production office and the acting area to schedule a prologue workshop in the spring of 2024, allowing me to get in the room with actors and designers to explore these ideas and begin to devise our preshow.

We began our process with a discussion of the play and its themes and a readthrough of Brecht's original prologue (as translated by James and Tania Stern.) We unpacked and analyzed the prologue and its function in Brecht's original conception of the play. We also watched videos of contentious town hall meetings where residents objected to proposals to build low-income housing in their neighborhoods.

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Moving away from this table work, I lead the company in a series of exercises designed to explore the theme of making a sacrifice for the greater good. In one exercise, the actors created PowerPoint presentations encouraging radical action and sacrifice, exploring how they might convince people to give things up for those in need. These exercises were a fruitful opportunity to discuss performance style. I encouraged the actors to commit to the stakes of advocating for a divisive idea instead of “playing at” this situation or parodying it.

We also read and discussed newspaper coverage of a controversial proposal to turn a historical hotel in San Francisco’s Chinatown neighborhood into shelter space for unhoused people. The historically under-resourced and marginalized Asian American community of San Francisco resonated with the sympathetic and displaced Goat Farmers. There was a strong sense in the room that even though we understood the urgent need for more homeless shelters, it made us uncomfortable to imagine that a marginalized, racial-minority community would be the ones asked to make a sacrifice. I made the case that the need for us to recognize and make peace with this sort of discomfort was exactly what Brecht was trying to get at with his prologue.

In the culmination of our multiday workshop, we staged a series of improvised debates in the style of town hall meetings, with one actor playing a moderator and the rest of the company divided between two sides. In some of these improvisations, actors debated the proposal to turn the hotel into a homeless shelter. In others, they took on the roles of goat farmers and fruit farmers debating the fate of the contested valley. We incorporated AV design elements into these improvisations including handheld microphones and a live feed document camera connected to a projector. Initially, this camera was used to illustrate points on printed documents and maps or to magnify hand drawn diagrams. As the improvisations escalated, performers began to fight over

the microphones and the camera was co-opted by performers to magnify their faces in a desperate attempt to capture the attention of their fellow meeting attendees and make their points heard.

At the end of this short workshop process, I concluded that we could style our preshow in the mode of these contentious meetings, and identified several key moments and design gestures that I would carry forward into the writing of what eventually became the preshow.

## **Process: Design Collaboration**

### **Design Collaboration: Scenery**

After receiving feedback on our preliminary scenic design, Duma and I decided to go further in our explorations of the space and how it could function. Duma’s initial design was a very symmetrical basketball gymnasium with an auditorium-style proscenium stage and a wraparound balcony. Based on the feedback from faculty mentors we determined that the space was too symmetrical and too flat — essentially just an open container rather than a space that would support our storytelling. I also feared that our associations with the gymnasium elements of the design would be too sports-specific, and would not conjure the idea of a community center space with multiple uses, even if our research showed that people do use gymnasium spaces for non-athletic purposes.

In reflecting on the theme of conflicts over space and the central action of turning what we have into what we need, I started thinking about more unusual multipurpose rooms. I found photographs of an unusual multipurpose room in a town recreation center from my childhood

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hometown, which features a basketball hoop, angled asymmetrical walls, an adjoining kitchen, and various nooks and crannies. Inspired by this research Duma created a new proposal for our space, which we iterated on and honed as we began to work through the play scene by scene, discussing how performers could utilize found objects to transform the space into the play’s many locations and crucial objects. We paid special attention to several key moments including the treacherous bridge crossing, the glacial stream, and the river that separates Simon and Grusha in their Act Three reunion. We agreed that the transformation of objects to create the locations, props, and special effects should be motivated by the action of the cast in plain view of the audience to support the spine of our production and to embrace a Verfremdungseffekt-inspired style.

## **Design Collaboration: Costumes**

Based on the large cast of 16 performers (8 MFA students, 5 undergrads, and 3 community musicians) and the several dozen characters that they transform into over the course of the show, professor An-lin Dauber agreed to sign on as an associate costume designer to support Xiaoyan. The costume shop also asked that we plan on having the actors wear their own clothes when they played themselves in the opening preshow, which would make the scale of the show more manageable. Given the concept for our production in which actors would transform into different characters by layering accent pieces over a base layer, this proposal felt like an appropriate one.

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In our early collaboration, Xiaoyan and I struggled to find design ideas that would be clear and familiar to the audience while also conjuring the fantastical fairy tale world of the play. A key discovery came when Xiaoyan presented the idea of dressing the Governor’s Wife in a makeshift version of a hot pink high fashion cape fashioned out of pink bubble wrap. This pink ended up being the key color for The Governor’s palace. We also settled on the idea of dressing the soldiers in football pad armor with scrimmage jersey tunics. These elements grounded the design as we began to explore the world of the costumes. Another key idea came with the concept to put Azdak in a judge’s wig made of rolls of American currency and a bright red boxing robe. We also discussed a continuum where the rich and powerful people of this world were the most costume-y and stylized with found objects acting as clothes, while the peasants, servants, and farmers would be dressed in realer clothing and feel more down to earth.

## **Design Collaboration: Lighting**

Based on Duma’s research, Peter’s lighting concept was to light the show as if the people staging the production had access to the rudimentary tools of a community center or high school theater program — especially an old-fashioned hard-edged spotlight and incandescent strip lights in only three primary colors. These concepts gelled with the ideas of people turning what they have into what they need and conjured a self-conscious theatricality that felt appropriate for our Brechtian storytelling aesthetic. Peter also proposed incorporating hanging utilitarian work lights, inspired by research we looked at of school gymnasiums and community centers. These lights would hang over the stage and audience, helping to establish that the spectators were in the same world as the performers. They also served as a powerful tool for the transitions between

acts, dramatically underscoring the sharp shift from the world of Grusha and Azdak to the frame of the community center meeting.

## **Design Collaboration: Music**

While Brecht’s play includes many songs and lyric passages — including narrative songs sung by the singer, Broadway style musical theater soliloquys, and diegetic folk tunes — it does not have an official musical score. Historically, productions have composed original music to accompany Brecht’s words. For our production, I worked with local theater artists and musicians YUELAN and Kyle Levien as co-composers. In addition to their theatrical work, YUELAN and Kyle perform together in local indie music venues along with drummer Josh Valdez, and the trio served as the band for our production.

Given the theme of a community working together to turn the resources at hand to serve their needs, we discussed early on the goal of creating music that would sound like it came from the diverse community suggested by our cast. We also discussed the goals and functions of various songs, some of which are more expositional, others of which are more emotional. In his Translator’s Note, Alistair Beaton writes, “Lyrics play an important part in this play. Where the originals are unscanned and unstructured I have left them like that in English. Where Brecht has made them tightly structured and rhymed, I have done the same, though by definition this demands a freer interpretation of the original lyric.” These “unscanned and unstructured” lyrics posed a particular challenge. In our early discussions we shared musical references including lyrical electropop (e.g. Sylvan Esso), punk rock (e.g. Patti Smith), grungy singer-songwriter (e.g. Regina Spektor and The Mountain Goats), and experimental pop rock (e.g. The Flaming Lips

and The Dirty Projectors.) For each song in the show, we discussed its dramaturgical function, identified specific musical genres and song references, and talked through the staging needs of my vision and how they could be supported by music. As we approached rehearsal, the composing team shared demos and I responded with notes allowing them to iterate up until first rehearsal, when we shared final demos and rehearsal backing tracks with the cast and team. The final production ultimately included more than 35 original songs.

## **Design Collaboration: Sound**

With the composing team handling live music for the show, design conversations with sound designer Alex Parr focused on two primary areas: amplification and sound effects to support the story telling. (Alex also curated musical playlists for preshow, intermission, and postshow.) Much like my conversations with Peter about lighting, Alex’s initial impulse was to design sound that would feel like it was being produced and mixed within the constraints of non-professional artists working in our community meeting setting. With a live band on stage, including drums and electric guitar, it was important to amplify singers to compete with the music. We settled on using a wireless handheld microphone for The Singer, imagining her as the frontwoman of a garage band. In addition to The Singer, and backup singing by the other musicians, the script calls for singing by Grusha, a Soldier, Simon, a Farmer Neighbor, and Azdak. Our initial instinct was that Grusha should be amplified using a lavalier and wireless mic pack instead of a handheld microphone given the need for her to use her hands to carry Michael and accomplish other tasks during songs like “The Adoption Song” and “The Lullaby”. We also chose to use a mic pack for the Soldier who sings a marching song. These wireless microphones

allowed for songs to be seamlessly integrated into scenes. Elsewhere, the handheld microphones were used in a more presentational *Verfremdungseffekt* style, as when Simon and Grusha sing directly to the audience revealing “what they think but do not say.” Unfortunately, we had limited access to wireless mic packs, but we decided to embrace this constraint and have some of our other diegetic songs — such as Azdak’s “Song of the War in Iran” sung into wireless microphones which we integrated into the world of the play as tools in the courtroom of our play within the play.

For sound effects, Alex proposed that we try to follow the spirit of our central action — “turning what we have into what we need” — by creating as many sounds as possible live in the space. The band was able to use instruments to provide many satisfying sound effects, notably the water drops for Lavrenti and Grusha’s melting snow scene. Other effects were created by actors live and amplified using handheld microphones, including all of Michael’s crying and the sounds of whooshing wind. In the end, Alex did prepare a small number of pre-recorded cues, notably the sounds of children playing and laughing at the end of Act Three.

## **Design Collaboration: Puppetry**

Sara’s first proposal was that the puppet(s) representing baby and toddler Michael should be in the style of a found or improvise object rather than a crafted puppet. In an ideal world, we agreed that this object would have thematic significance to our world, serving as a central metaphor or image. After our initial prologue workshop, we discussed the possibility of a map or document as something that the “community members” might be fighting over. Sara pitched the idea of magically transforming this contested paper — a metaphor for the contested valley —

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into Michael, who is linked to the contested valley in the mirrored structure of Brecht’s play. The paper would at first be crumpled into a ball and swaddled as a baby and then, through sleight of hand, unfold into a bunraku-style paper puppet with folded-paper joints.

As the preshow/prologue continued to evolve and we moved away from the centrality of the map, Sara and I met to discuss what object would feel appropriately significant in our world. I returned to the town meeting visual research that Duma and I used to create the scenic world and proposed that we incorporate the idea of handcrafted signs seen hanging on a folding table in one of the Vermont “Town Meeting” photos. We agreed that if we created signs that read COMMUNITY MEETING, we could transform the sign reading COMMUNITY into Michael, with the intention that the audience would understand the fight over baby as linked to the core idea of the community dispute at the heart of our production.



*Figure 3 Putney, VT Town Meeting (O'Connor)*

Sara continued to visit rehearsals, working with actors on puppetry and object-work scenes in the show, and iterating on several prototype Michaels. The final version of the toddler

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puppet appears to be made of a butcher paper COMMUNITY sign, but conceals a number of reinforcements to give him the rigidity needed for key actions in our staging.

Sara and I also had early conversations about how the document camera, projectors, and AV equipment could be used as a tool for toy theater or live video puppetry to help establish locations and aid in the exposition of some of the dense moments in the play’s dramaturgy. In keeping with our found object aesthetic, Sara proposed the idea of handcrafted live video sequences using a collage of found, drawn, handcrafted, and manipulated paper-based material. She recruited assistant set designers Porter Lance and Jordan Cohen to spearhead the project, with MFA student Porter taking the lead. Porter and Jordan attended many staging rehearsals, working to respond to the work of actors in the room with improvised and planned video moments illustrating shifts in location and time, or supporting emotional shifts more expressionistically in what we termed a “music video style.” The collaboration was playful and dynamic, with me throwing out proposals in the room which the team gamely attempted on the fly. In early planning, we assumed that these projected materials would eventually be manipulated by the ensemble in keeping with ensemble-driven aesthetic that we were finding for the piece. In early staging I “penciled in” various actors for this task by staging them near the document camera to be ready to pick up the puppetry, but as these video sequences grew more complex and we approached tech rehearsals, Sara suggested that we instead assign a dedicated ASM from our team of three to learn and execute these moves. Joo Kim took over the task and executed it beautifully, serving as a constant element in our *mise en scène*.

## **Process: The Rehearsal Studio**

This production presented many logistical challenges and special needs which had to be addressed in the rehearsal process. No matter what, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is a long play, with a large cast, numerous events, and myriad locations. There is also a large quantity of music integrated into the action, requiring musical rehearsals and incorporating musicians with the cast. The play has many violent sequences and some intimate moments which needed to be choreographed. My choices in style and rules of the world added other considerations, including the need for onstage costume changes and actor-motivated scenic transformations and special effects.

Our first rehearsal was scheduled for Monday, September 23<sup>rd</sup> and we moved to the theater for spacing on Wednesday, October 23<sup>rd</sup>, with tech beginning on Thursday, September 24<sup>th</sup> — giving us roughly four weeks in the studio to stage and rehearse the production before technical rehearsals.

The first week of rehearsals was primarily dedicated to an initial readthrough, design presentations, and table work, along with two sessions of workshop time exploring puppetry, movement, and the use of found objects to create the elements of our world.

The second week of rehearsals was used to stage the first half of the show, up through intermission. (Act One, Act Two, and the first three scenes of Act Three.) Music rehearsals were scheduled where possible, pulling actors into a second room to work with the music team.

In my initial plan, the third week of rehearsals was intended to be used to stage the second half of the show. Unfortunately, some unexpected factors complicated this plan,

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including a nasty chest cold which limited my energy and productivity. (I am very grateful that this germ didn't infect any performers or other team members and for everyone's grace and patience with me during this stage of the process.) This week also turned out to be the best time for our Fight and Intimacy Choreographer, Ian Bond, to join rehearsals, and given the large number of violent moments in the story, I needed to allocate a number of hours to working with him. We managed to achieve a very rough draft of staging for the second half of the show, but the work on Acts Four and Five was very rushed.

In our fourth week of rehearsal, we attempted to put the pieces together in a stumble through, in anticipation of our designer run on Thursday 10/17. It was clear that the staging was not yet ready for our move into the theater, and we used the remaining time in this week to revise and tune staging throughout the show — especially in clarifying the transitions and restaging and reworking Act Five and several key scenes in Act Four.

We were lucky to be supported by the production department and by various shops who supplied rehearsal versions — or final versions — of almost all of the props, costume pieces, and furniture pieces for us to use in the rehearsal room from almost the first day of rehearsal. We were also provided wheeled costume racks by the costume shop, which organized clothes for onstage costume changes and became key scenic pieces in numerous locations. Given our style, having these objects in the room was essential to the success of the production, since it allowed us to discover how to tell the story of the ensemble transforming found objects from the world of the community center into the essential elements of Grusinia.

In the end, we achieved a lot of work in our four weeks of studio time, but I did not prioritize running the show as many times as we needed. We only attempted two full run

thoughts of the entire five act play before the shift to technical rehearsals, and on neither of these days did we manage to run the entire play. I know that I was attempting to navigate the many needs pressing on our time, but in retrospect I regret not pushing to do full runs sooner in the process.

## **Process: Technical Rehearsals**

As I acknowledged in my discussions of our time in the rehearsal room, this was an ambitious project where we attempted to achieve a lot in our short time in the studio. We saw evidence that our efforts paid off when we moved into our performance space in Meany Hall and began the process of technical rehearsals. Because the actors had spent so much time in the rehearsal room working on the transformation of space through actor-motivated transitions and rehearsing the transformation of character through onstage costume changes, they arrived at tech with a fluidity and facility that allowed us to start linking pieces of the show together. Our design team was also well prepared; notably, Peter came into tech with drafts of lighting cues programmed and ready to begin working through the show. Thanks to this preparation we were able to execute a smooth rolling tech process, and to dedicate time to continue improving and solidifying staging and storytelling.

Unfortunately, due to a misunderstanding of the schedule on my part and poor communication between me, stage management, and production management we had one misstep where we made an unactionable plan to rework the first half of the show *and* do a run through on Sunday, October 27<sup>th</sup>, but failed to schedule the pivot from working to running early

enough in the day to complete the run through. Unfortunately, this mistake necessitated the cancelation of our Tuesday preview in order to ensure that the cast and crew could run the entire show before presenting it to an audience. We continued to work diligently and were very prepared for our preview on October 31<sup>st</sup>.

## **Process: Iteration and Development**

As in any production process, there were many aspects of the show where my understanding of how best to bring the script to life evolved over the journey from preproduction conversations to the rehearsal studio and into tech and performances. I would like to zoom in on a few relevant aspects of the production and discuss their development through the process.

### **The Preshow**

In my first day of rehearsal speech, I pitched the company on the idea that the container for our production would be a community meeting:

“Our production is set in a community meeting, or to put it another way, the live event we’re making IS a community meeting. We’re all in the room with the audience — trying to figure out how to get on the same page so that we can answer this question that society has been trying to answer for centuries and still hasn’t figured out.

This idea of the community meeting was inspired by the original prologue to the play, which is about two villages trying to figure out who should get control of a valley.

I grew up in New England, where they still have town meeting day, and we also looked at zoning meetings and school board meeting.

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The thing about all of these gatherings is that they really hold the best and worst of a democratic society.

- The idea is that a community can come together, listen to each other, and make a decision together —
- but these are also the places where we see the ugliness, the shouting, the “not in my backyard philosophy.”

So the idea is that when the show starts, our values aren’t in alignment. We can’t agree on these questions of who should get what, what we owe each other. We can’t agree on how to decide.

Then, we work together — with the things on hand in our community meeting space and maybe a little help from the audience— to tell the story of Azdak and Grusha and the sacrifices they make or don’t make, and we begin to understand how we can come together to take what we have and transform it into what we need.”

This concept was the foundation for my approach to the preshow, both in terms of form (in the style of a contentious townhall meeting) and function (reaching out directly to the audience, establishing that they are sharing the same time and place as the performers). As previously discussed, I also wanted to use the preshow to serve the same function as Brecht’s prologue, but with a contemporary setting and style to better reach our audience. To my mind, the most important aspect of this would be creating the push and pull between two arguments: the idea that those who have already suffered deserve justice vs. the idea that sometimes individuals need to make a sacrifice for the greater good. As a progressive-minded person living in a left-leaning city, I see this tension in my community: likeminded people wrestling with their sense of what is fair vs. the pragmatic realities of living together. I see these tensions in Brecht’s play and hoped that the preshow could foreground them and help bring out their resonance in the entire play.

Through the experiments I ran in the spring workshop, I had identified a number of satisfying moments and theatrical moves that I thought would be useful in the prologue. A key

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moment for me came during an improvisation: the debate had devolved into an ugly shouting match, and I watched ensemble member Yeonshin Kim genuinely struggle to stop the argument and force her fellow performers to listen to each other, going so far as to unplug the speaker they were using to amplify their voices. In our reflection after the exercise, an anguished Yeonshin explained, "I'm so tired of the not listening." Knowing that Yeonshin would be playing the role of The Singer, I noted this moment down, imagining that it could serve as the turning point that would allow us to navigate from the squabble of the preshow into the story of Grusha and Azdak.

We began rehearsals without a script for the preshow. After staging the first half of the show, I brought in a rough draft of the preshow without lines assigned to particular performers. We sat in a circle and read the script out loud and held a brief table work discussion before getting on our feet and exploring staging for the text. At first, performers jumped in, grabbing lines here and there based on their impulses. Inspired by their instincts and my sense of how different performers or the characters they played might resonate with the points of view in the preshow, I began assigning lines. This time in rehearsal also served as a script workshop, letting me hear the text out loud and begin revising, trimming, and shaping it.

In conversations with my advisor Valerie Curtis-Newton, she encouraged me to pursue the heat in the preshow. Her advice was to make sure that there were real stakes and an actual conflict between different sides. In fact, her earliest advice had been to raise the stakes higher on the framing device — making it about a real conflict over land or pushing the two sides further apart on the political spectrum. My instinct was that I wanted the production to challenge the primarily left-leaning Seattle theater audience by presenting a thorny argument between two

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progressive prospectives, but I did want to try and stage a real conflict that pitted characters with opposing points of view against each other to fight for what they needed.

To this end, I decided we needed to clarify the conflict and the “two sides” of the argument further. As rehearsals continued, I proposed to Marena Kleinpeter (Grusha) and Jerik Fernandez (Azdak) that we think of their preshow characters as the unofficial captains of two teams. Marena would lead the members of the ensemble who believed in individual sacrifice for the greater good. Jerik would champion those who argued that real justice would require a collective revolution and razing of the system. I revised the opening of the preshow, adding a moment of conflict between Marena and Jerik at the very top of the show and planting the idea that the ensemble had agreed to come together to stage the production without fully agreeing on its message:

**Marena:**

Thank you all for being here in person.  
We’ve been talking a lot about  
How to take care of each other  
And  
How we should decide —

**Jerik:** (*interrupting*)

Justice. We’ve been talking about Justice.

*Marena and Jerik look at each other*

I also did an exercise with the entire ensemble, presenting a series of political and philosophical questions and asking them to place themselves on a spectrum across the rehearsal room with the extreme points of view on either side and moderate positions in the middle. We first did the exercise with our own political points of view in mind and then repeated it from the

points of view of our characters. I worked with the performers to choose a side in the “sacrifice” vs. “revolution” debate of the preshow by either identifying with or pushing against the point of view of a character they played in the show. (Thinking of Brecht’s theory that performers ought to intentionally present a point of view on their character, I proposed that the actors might play a community member who was motivated to make their point by playing a character with an opposite point of view — proving how wrong this person is to the audience in order to make their point.)

We continued to shape and iterate on the preshow all the way up through tech. One final detail was added when I discussed with scenic designer Duma Du how we might use a white board she had added as a piece of set dressing. Our set already had a real working clock hanging on another wall, and I proposed that we draw a calendar on the white board and add a star during each preshow highlighting that day’s date, establishing that our production was happening right here and right now.

## **The Transitions**

Given the play’s episodic structure, the need to stage its numerous locations within our unit set, and our choice to motivate all of the scenic transformations by the actors in plain view, transitions between scenes and acts were a crucial piece of this production. In conversations with Val about how to weave the conflict of the preshow through the production, she encouraged me to think of the transitions as place where we could return to the frame and track the arc of this conflict.

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In my original conception, I imagined an arc that would begin with two opposing factions, and, over the course of the play, we would see these factions move together until they were eventually working together in concert. Val encouraged me to find moments where we could see individuals make the choice to move away from the extremes of the preshow and towards collaboration. With this vision in mind, I began staging transitions between acts that featured clear moments of conflict between the two factions. In my initial draft of the first transition — from the end of the preshow into the top of Act One — I staged performers to either work individually (focusing on what *you* need to start the show ) or collaboratively (focusing on what *we all* need to start the show.) One key image we found involved Marena left on her own to clear a pile of chairs which had been abandoned in the middle of the space by careless ensemble members, illustrating her commitment to individuals doing what must be done for the greater good and foreshadowing Grusha’s choice to save the abandoned baby. Another clear example of this strategy was the initial version of the transition from Act One to Act Two, where I staged the half of the ensemble who wanted to “tear down the system” to sneak up on a group of “sacrifice-minded” ensemble members diligently working to clear the stage from Act One and shock them by thudding the potted plants down behind them. This drafted arc would have eventually culminated in the final major transition from Act Four to Act Five, with the two factions facing off in a mirror of the moment of argumentative breakdown from the preshow. I staged Marena to begin attempting to move a heavy table on her own, echoing the moment of her clearing chairs in the prologue. After a moment, Betzabeth Gonzalez (the actor playing The Cook and Prince Kazbeki and a key member of the “tear down the system” team) would step forward, offering to help Marena and breaking the stalemate between the two factions.

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As the production developed over the course of the rehearsal process, several problems with this plan emerged. One key issue was the large quantity of moving objects in the production. Even with a cast of 13 actors, there were enough things that needed to happen that telling a story about only a small subset of the cast working together to execute them meant multiplying the responsibilities of each ensemble member past what felt reasonable. This was especially true in moments like the transition to the Broken Bridge, when there was lots of detailed setup to do and a good portion of the ensemble was unavailable to do it due to costumes changes or preparations to play specific characters. I also struggled generally with handling the pace and rhythm of the entire production, and felt a lot of pressure to make transitions efficient in order to keep our run time manageable. My sense that we needed faster transitions to keep the play moving also made it difficult to keep the sense of improvisation that our “found object” logic suggested — the play was feeling more like a mechanically rehearsed performance and less like a discovery-driven improvisation. As I began to compromise on the original vision and recruit every available performer to make specific moments functional, the logic of the ensemble’s arc began to erode. As we approached tech, I remember Yeonshin approaching me with a perfectly appropriate and genuine question: she didn’t understand why her character would not immediately leap into action and help Marena move the table in the Act Five transition. I had already begun to think that the transition was not working and assured Yeonshin that I would restage it.

At this point, I accepted that to make the production flow and hold audience attention we would need the majority of the ensemble to work together on fluid transitions. Luckily, the sense of ensemble and commitment to the show that had developed in the company through our shared

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understanding of the production’s mission and the devised processes we had used in rehearsal meant that everyone was incredibly game and frequently volunteered or stepped in on their own to make transitions smooth and support their castmates. Instead of telling the story through an arc of who was or wasn’t working together, I incorporated specific moments of storytelling with adlib lines of dialogue in the transitions between acts. My hope was to shift the logic to one where the ensemble was working together to stage the play but still in conflict about what it meant. In the transition from Act One to Act Two, I had Taylor McWilliams-Woods (the actor playing Grusha’s brother Lavrenti, and a core advocate for Marena’s faction) attempt to restate her case from the preshow to the audience: “See what I’m saying? When some people have enough and other people don’t, somebody’s —” She was interrupted by Jerik insisting that there was more play to see and that what was coming next would change the audience’s mind. (“Get ready for act two!”) In tech, I cut the Act Four to Act Five transition, replacing it with a symbolic high five between Marena and Jerik representing their shared commitment to moving forward to tell the story together. On the sound of the high five, we shifted from transition lighting to the saturated red world of Act Five and the entire ensemble leapt into action, rearranging furniture pieces as The Singer began her narration introducing the final scene of the play.

We also managed to improve upon the pacing and length of the show by approaching our final dress rehearsal as an “Italian Run”. Following this run we saw marked improvement in picking up cues and general momentum throughout the show. (I am confident that if I had pushed our pace in the rehearsal room to make time for additional runs of the entire show before tech it would have helped with this problem.)

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In reflecting on the entire arc from the preshow through the transitions, I think that the framing story of the ensemble dispute was a mixed success. While we had clear moments that resonated with our central action of a community working together to find a way to transform what they have into what they need, we did not sufficiently clarify the stakes or argument of the preshow and failed to create the coherent throughline I had imagined.

Knowing what I know now, if I had more time to revisit the production, I would shift the logic of the preshow debate. As discussed in my analysis of the play earlier in this paper, I am inspired by the juxtaposition of ideas of view in Brecht's play: in order to provide for the needs of the collective, we need individuals to make immediate sacrifices *and* we need to work together to reform the unjust structures that govern our world.

In Brecht's original prologue, the conflict between the goat farmers and the fruit farmers is resolved and then the action of the play within the play begins. My initial feeling was that this choice left potential dramatic stakes on the table, but I now suspect that his dramaturgy illustrates the possibility of people not fully having their minds changed but still agreeing to work together. In my attempts to carry this conflict through the production, I think that some of the frustrations I experienced came from my attempts to impose something onto the play. If I were to revisit the preshow, I would try changing the logic of the sequence, shifting it from a staged fight between ensemble members towards more of a presentation to the audience, with different members of the cast trying to make their case of what message in the play they think is most important. This version would function less like a dramatic scene and more like a live director's note, but it would allow us to highlight the thematic tension in the play and still serve as a *Verfremdungseffekt* highlighting that the story of the play within the play is a constructed

performance. In fact, this choice has the potential to strengthen the “realness” of the preshow, since it would not involve a rehearsed breakdown and fight and would instead rely on attempts to sway the audience to agree with one side over another. I also think that this change would resolve a confusion in our production around the idea of collaboration, since both points of view on the play’s moral are fundamentally cooperative. In the end, the ensemble still comes together in Brecht’s symbol of a circle and takes up collective ownership of the problem of care for the community; even if we disagree on how to get where we’re going, we can still work together to move in the right direction.

## **Azdak’s Journey**

The character of Azdak is a central figure in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. While Grusha functions more like a traditional dramatic protagonist, Azdak is the focus of Act Four and a pivotal player in the climax of Act Five. He is also harder to pin down, since Grusha’s objective, obstacles, and motivation are much clearer and develop in a more straightforward fashion.

In my first reading of the play many years ago, I think Azdak struck me as a sort of wise trickster king. I assumed he was fundamentally committed to doing the right thing, and smart enough to know that the only way he could get away with it in a fundamentally unjust world was by pretending to be corrupt and mischievous. This sense of Azdak as fundamentally wise and moral is reinforced by having him double as omniscient narrator The Singer, as he did in Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble production and as was suggested by the stage directions of the Eric Bentley translation that I bought in a used bookstore and read as an undergraduate. While I have

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never seen another production of the play, my impression from reading reviews and discussing the play's reputation with my colleagues is that this is how the role is often interpreted.

As I began my preproduction for the play, I had the sense that this interpretation of the character lacked stakes and drama. Brecht sets us up to root for Grusha over the Governor's Wife, and if we are sure that Grusha is in the right and confident that Azdak is a static character who will do the right thing, then where are the stakes for Act Five? As I read the text searching for the turning point for this character, I zoomed in on the moment when Grusha stands up to Azdak in the trial and delivers a series of passionate speeches: "I tell you what: you don't know any more about justice than I do." I began to see this moment as a turning point where Grusha, who has stepped up and made a sacrifice to provide for Michael, convinces Azdak to make a sacrifice of his own, giving up his power as a judge in order to do the right thing. As a result, not only do Grusha and Michael get a happy ending, but the land is given over to public use instead of the sole ownership of The Governor's Wife.

As my understanding of the play grew, I revised my interpretation of the spine of the play, moving away from "stepping up to make a sacrifice" and towards the idea of "transforming what we have into what we need". In this understanding of the play, Grusha is confronted with a judge who needs to be transformed by her actions. This articulation of the core action also helps us understand that Azdak is a person struggling with circumstances of his own, trying to figure out the best course of action in an imperfect world.

As I began table work and conversations with the cast, my understanding of Azdak continued to deepen. One key given circumstance we needed to hold was how Azdak at the beginning of his journey is already an advocate for revolution and justice. It became clear that

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we needed to tell a story about someone who believed in the possibility of change losing his faith and regaining it. As Jerik Fernandez and the other performers wrestled with understanding who Azdak is and why he does what he does, we began seeking contemporary references for Azdak's ideology, both to help Jerik identify with him and to make sense of him in the contemporary frame of our production. Early on, I talked about the idea that Azdak is an idealist who detests corruption, pointing to examples he uses in "The Song of the War with Iran". I also referenced the phrase "All Cops Are Bastards" or "ACAB" as a contemporary analogy for how Azdak talks to and about Shauva the policeman. These two concepts began to reveal the complexity in Azdak's journey: the story of a man who hates the corruption of the powerful and harbors a deep suspicion of the criminal justice system who then becomes a judge. At first, he thinks that he can work within and around the system to do better, but he finds himself failing to live up to his ideals and is eventually confronted with that failure by Grusha's accusations. I found myself thinking about Brecht's biography as a left-leaning activist who fled Nazi Germany and whether anyone he knew had tried and failed to "do the right thing" while working in or for the fundamentally evil fascist government. In table work sessions looking at the trials Azdak oversees as a judge, I proposed to the cast that we explore the theme of justice vs. payback. For me, this distilled the point of these scenes: on the one hand, the audience enjoys seeing the rich and powerful antagonists put in their place. On the other hand, they are troubled by how Azdak goes about it. This is not a depiction of a justice system we would want to be tried by. These scenes are in some ways a power fantasy, showing the vicious revenge that the oppressed wish they could mete out to the powerful but also illustrating how true justice requires that the system treat everyone truly equally.

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As we began staging, we found ways to clarify and heighten the stakes of Azdak's story. Working on the fight choreography in which Azdak believes he will be hanged by the soldiers in Act Four, we discussed how this near death experience could serve as the turning point where Azdak loses faith in his ideals: he enters the scene believing that the coup is the start of a fair and just government of the people, but then faces the reality that the new regime will be controlled by vicious thugs who might kill him on a whim. The staged violence in Act Five is also key. I chose to stage this moment as realistically as possible, following Brecht's stage directions and dialogue and using realistic stage blood to communicate the story that Azdak is viciously beaten and brought to the edge of his death before being saved by the deus-ex-machina arrival of a message from The Grand Duke. Between this violence and the threats of The Governor's Wife and The Adjutant, Azdak begins the trial disoriented, bloody, and fearing for his life if he finds against The Governor's Wife in favor of Grusha.

I also worked with Jerik and the cast to express how Azdak the judge gives in to the temptations of corruption in his time as a judge. The play text illustrates this character trait through Azdak's solicitation of bribes, his constant requests for alcohol, and his sexual advances on Ludovica. We took these ideas even further in the songs that Brecht includes between Azdak's trials in Act Four. I encouraged the composition team to explore a pop punk style for these numbers, which I hoped would resonate with Azdak's "stick it to the man" philosophy and also seduce the audience into the fun roller coaster ride of Azdak's reign as a judge, further heightening the sense of juxtaposition with our uneasiness about the rulings he makes. We devised rock star movement sequences to go along with these musical numbers including Azdak

being pushed around in his wheely chair, chugging champagne, showering the ensemble with cash, and even snorting coke with Irakli the bandit.

## **The Rape Trial**

One of the most difficult scenes for the company was the first trial that Azdak oversees as a judge, in which The Innkeeper accuses a stableboy of raping his daughter Ludovica. The scene as written heavily implies that the accusation is false, and that Ludovica and her father are hoping the stableboy will be wrongly convicted to protect the family's reputation in a world where an upper-class woman having an extramarital affair with a working-class servant would be a disastrous scandal. Azdak finds in favor of the stableboy, and shockingly convicts Ludovica of raping the servant boy because she has made herself so physically attractive that he could not resist having sex with her.

The scene offends 21<sup>st</sup> century liberal sensibilities in several ways. It raises the specter of false rape accusations, which are in fact extremely rare, but are often brought up by rape apologists to justify skepticism of accusations of sexual violence. Azdak finds Ludovica guilty not through conventional evidence and legal process but instead by essentially concluding that she was "asking for it" because of how attractive she has made herself. The entire scene is written comedically, with Ludovica as the butt of the joke. Given the common belief that rape jokes are never funny, the scene feels almost as if it were designed to offend contemporary audiences.

In our first pass of table work I clarified to the cast that it was my interpretation that the rape accusation was false. I pointed in particular to the dialogue about how The Innkeeper kicked

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Ludovica “on behalf of (his) son” when he discovered her having sex with the stableboy, which suggested to me that he knew she was consenting to what was happening and highlighted the parenthetical stage direction describing her testimony as “over-rehearsed”. I also acknowledged that this scene would be difficult and might make as uncomfortable, but assured the performers that we would figure out how to make it work.

On our second pass through the play, we worked more slowly, moving through scenes beat by beat and unpacking actions and given circumstances. We reached this scene close to the end of the night and began it with less than 30 minutes before the end of rehearsal. Before we read the scene, Jerik requested permission to use the word “assault” instead of “rape” for our table read. This was the first sign of discomfort in the room, but it was clear that tension was present as we began to read. After the read, Kyler Simons, the undergraduate actor playing the stableboy, raised his hand and expressed discomfort with the material, explaining that he didn’t think he agreed with what happened in the scene and wasn’t sure he wanted to perform it. I detected a ripple of discomfort around the table and sensed that Kyler wasn’t the only one who felt uneasy. I immediately recognized that this was a moment that called for what my advisor Valerie Curtis-Newton refers to as “finding the fear in the room and facing it.”

I thanked Kyler for sharing his discomfort and explained that the material was high stakes but that I believed it was in the play for a reason. I reminded the team of the collective mission we shared in staging the play and how if we believed that the play was worth doing, then that meant there was a reason to do this scene. I acknowledged the things about the scene that might make people uncomfortable — the false rape accusation, the misogynistic language that Azdak uses to put Ludovica in her place, and the fact that when Brecht wrote the play it was much more

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commons to play matters of sexual assault to comedic ends. I pointed out the very real and unjust history of using these kinds of accusations to cover up consensual sexual encounters between members of oppressed groups and people in power. I also suggested that there might be value in making the audience uncomfortable as we explored the tension between payback and real justice. Finally, I assured them that the point of our rehearsal process would be to find a way to make the scene work and that it was okay if we didn't have all the answers at table work. I felt that this impromptu speech was effective in establishing why the scene was important to stage, but it was clear that there was still a lot of emotion in the room including more than one performer who was crying. After giving this short speech, I proposed that we end rehearsal ten minutes early and invited the cast to join me in a circle for a small closure ritual where we thanked each other for being present in rehearsal that day. I made myself available for one on one check ins with performers after the official conclusion of rehearsal, and made sure to touch base with the performers playing the stableboy and Ludovica.

While this moment solidified the company in our commitment to staging the scene, we still needed to figure out how to communicate these ideas to our audience. In our initial staging explorations, I encouraged Taylor McWilliams-Woods (Ludovica) to explore a portrayal of Ludovica as a powerful scheming villain, backed up by her powerful scheming father (played by Minki Bai). We struggled to find the arc of the scene. Taylor told me that one of her concerns was finding a way to make it absolutely clear to the audience that the accusation was false and that Ludovica had consented to having sex with the stable boy. I agreed that it was not yet unambiguous. When we returned in another rehearsal to continue our work on the scene, Taylor asked my permission to try a different take in which she played Ludovica as a caricature of a

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libidinous and vacuous woman flirting with all of the men on stage — including the stableboy. She also proposed adding a site gag where Ludovica reads part of her “over-rehearsed” testimony off of her hand, as if she or her father have made written notes to make sure she doesn’t forget what she is supposed to say. These proposals unlocked something in the scene, allowing us to contrast a cartoonish Innkeeper and Ludovica against a more earnest stableboy. They also gave Jerik as Azdak permission to go over the top with his sexist tear down of Ludovica, which strengthened our goal of complicating the portrayal of Azdak. With the assistance of our Fight and Intimacy Choreographer Ian Bond, we added a moment of Azdak slapping Ludovica’s butt as a button on the scene. In performance, the scene consistently got laughs from audience members while also provoking squirming discomfort. I believe the mixture of these two responses was evidence that the scene worked as intended

## **Post Show Reflection**

Looking back on the production, I think that there were many areas of success and many ways I could have improved with more time, effort, and skill. Of course, every theatrical process has limits on the time and resources available to bring the show to life, and I do believe that we used the time we had to create a production that told the story, engaged audiences, and challenged them to reflect on relevant themes. Many colleagues, friends, and strangers said kind things about the production — emphasizing that it was entertaining, funny, thought-provoking, and beautiful.

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I do think that there were ways the production could have been stronger. I have already discussed my reflection on the framing story and my inability to clarify the conflict of the preshow and its development through the play’s transitions. My failure to distil and reveal this aspect of the narrative also caused problems with the pacing and rhythm of the show — particularly since the chaotic design aesthetic that I embraced meant that the stage was littered with props and moving pieces that needed to be navigated. While I do feel that we eventually found the momentum needed to keep the audience engaged through the entire production, I think that staging cleaner, more specific transitions earlier in the process and refining them in the rehearsal studio would have allowed me more breathing room to create more variety in the rhythms of the scenes.

I also think that there were moments when this aesthetic of “controlled chaos” got in the way of clear story telling. This was particularly true in scenes with large numbers of ensemble members, like the wedding/funeral scene at Jussup’s house. If I had made the time to be more specific in blocking this scene, I think I could have better controlled the focus to tell our story instead of creating a wash of house party pandemonium.

One other place where I think increased clarity could have been found was in the many songs sung by the singer. As a narrator, The Singer is frequently moving the story forward and giving exposition about time, place, action, and character motivation. As we got into tech, it was clear to me that we were not yet able to understand all of The Singer’s lyrics. I think this was due to several different factors, including the acoustic challenges of our space, but one element that was fully in my control was the style of music we chose for the production. While the punk rock and experimental pop references we drew on had strong emotional resonance for the tone I was

trying to set, the style did not inherently support clear enunciated lyrics. I did attempt to address this with some interventions including encouraging the music team to find more moments for Yeonshin to “speak sing” the delivery of crucial pieces of exposition and asking the sound team to keep working to achieve the best possible mix between instruments and singing. We also used the live video projector to project the lyrics of the show’s ultimate moral in our finale sequence.

## Conclusions:

As the culmination of my three years of graduate study at the School of Drama, this production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* served as an opportunity to integrate a number of key lessons.

One of the recurring themes in my time at UW has been the importance of articulating mission, purpose, and intention. In my coursework, I was constantly challenged to communicate the *why* behind my ideas clearly and efficiently, whether it was in a seminar writing mission statements for a grant application, in a studio class defending my choices on an assignment, or in writing a pre-paper explaining what I wanted an audience to take away from a show. As a political — even polemical — play, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* was the perfect project to put these skills to the test. In my discussions with designers, my work with the actors, and my crafting of the original preshow, I saw time and time again how my ability to articulate what this play was about, why I thought it was worth doing, and how I believed it should be done made the difference in getting my collaborators on board and giving them the buy-in they needed to make choices that contributed to the production. I also saw how the places where I lacked clarity,

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where I wasn't ready to distil my vision to a poetic core, were the spots where my team struggled the most.

Another recurring theme has been the tension between my idiosyncratic taste as a theater maker and audience member and the fundamentals of directing craft. In many classes at The School of Drama, I studied the essential tools of dramatic story telling including the principals of action-driven Stanislavsky-based acting methods, visual composition and picturization in staging performers, and the theories of Aristotelian text analysis and dramaturgy. These ideas have all gone into a director's toolbox which I can draw on to bring a script from the page to the stage. But this systematic approach to staging live performance has sometimes felt at odds with my more intuitive experience of what gets me excited about making and seeing theater. I am consistently seduced by liveness, by the sense of presence in an immersive experience, by the blurring between the reality of what is happening in the theater and the fiction of what is happening in the world of the characters. I crave the complex layering of ideas, the chaos of theatrical spectacle run amok, and the sense that I can't quite summarize exactly what is happening on stage.

This production was an opportunity to try and synthesize my toolbox with my taste — to use the skills I have honed as a student to stage an experience of big ideas, blurry theatricality, and chaotic design that still tells a story, reveals the humanity of its characters, and presents a clear point of view to the audience.

I am walking away from this process with the sense that I could have done a better job executing the production in numerous ways, big and small, but I also see it as a successful experiment that proved, at least to me, that I have learned how to make the kind of art I want to

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make and how to be the artist I want to be. Making that work and being that artist will not be easy, but I am leaving graduate school with the skillset, the passion, and the vision that will get me there.

## Appendix A: Design Documentation



Figure 4 Final Scenic Model

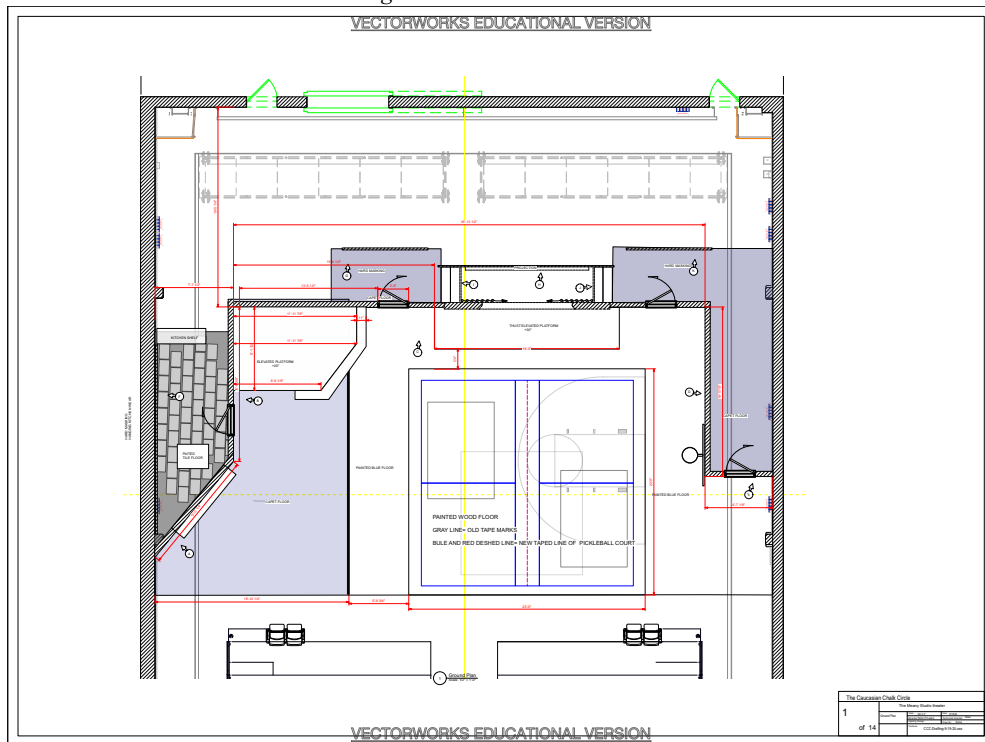


Figure 5 Final Scenic Drafting (Ground Plan)

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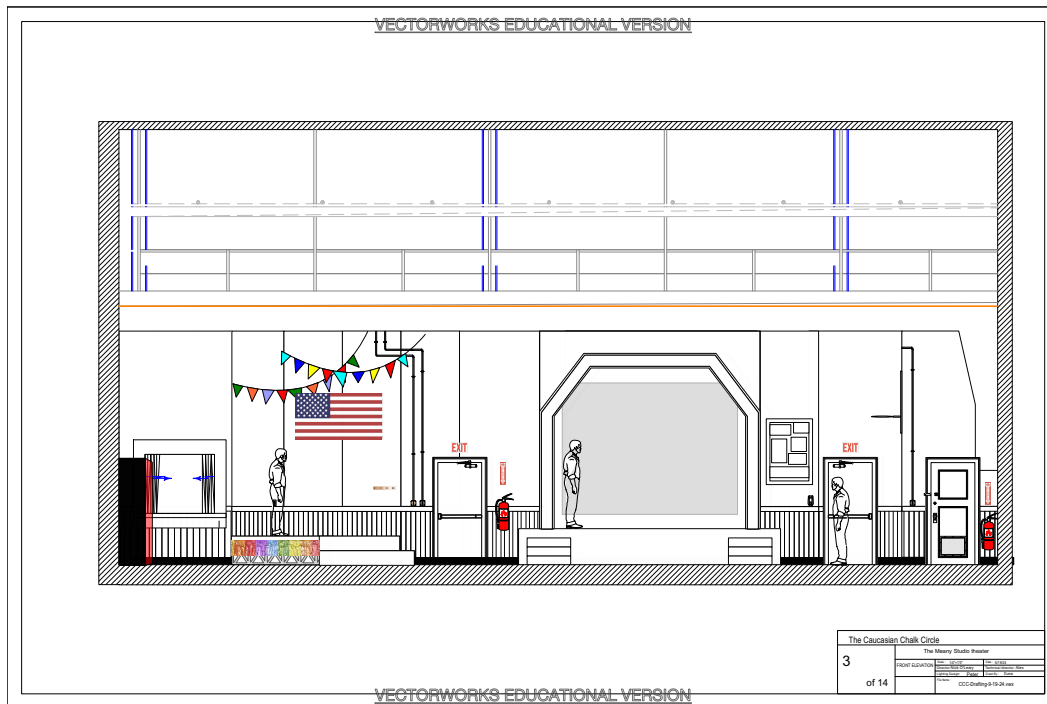


Figure 6 Final Scenic Drafting (Elevation)

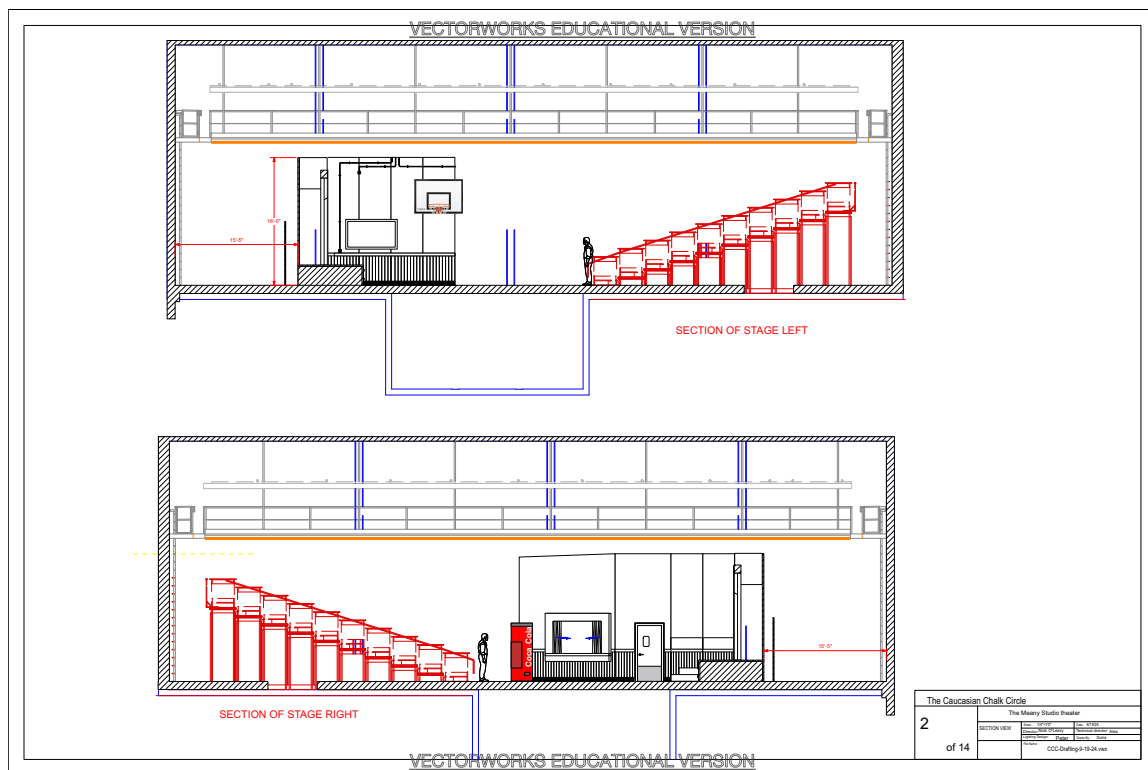


Figure 7 Final Scenic Drafting (Section)

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Figure 8 Ensemble Costume Renderings (Prologue)



Figure 9 Ensemble Costume Renderings (Act One)

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Figure 10 Ensemble Costume Renderings (Act Two)



Figure 11 Ensemble Costume Renderings (Act Three)

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Figure 12 Ensemble Costume Renderings (Act Four)



Figure 13 Ensemble Costume Renderings (Act Five)

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## Appendix B: Production Photos

All production photos by Christine Mitchell, permission granted to use by the UW School  
of Drama.



Figure 14 *The Community Meeting (Preshow)*

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*Figure 15 Live Video Puppetry Station*



*Figure 16 Grusha (Act One)*

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*Figure 17 Torturing The Governor (Act One)*



*Figure 18 Prince Kazbeki (Act One)*

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*Figure 19 Grusha Saves the Child (Act One)*

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Figure 20 Grusha Outside the City Walls (Act Two)



Figure 21 Abandoning The Child (Act Two)

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Figure 22 "Why So Happy?" (Act Two)



Figure 23 Crossing The Broken Bridge (Act Two)

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Figure 24 Grusha at Lavrenti's (Act Three)



Figure 25 The Wedding / Funeral (Act Three)

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Figure 26 Michael Grows Up (Act Three)



Figure 27 "What They Think They Do Not Say" (Act Three)

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Figure 28 "The Song of The War in Iran" (Act Four)



Figure 29 Azdak imitates The Grand Duke (Act Four)

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*Figure 30 The Rape Trial (Act Four)*



*Figure 31 Azdak Transition (Act Four)*

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*Figure 32 The Governor's Wife Testifies (Act Five)*



*Figure 33 Azdak (Act Five)*

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*Figure 34 The Test of the Chalk Circle (Act Five)*



*Figure 35 The Finale (Act Five)*

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