

ART & CULTURE



The Last Judgment: Experiencing the 'Caucasian Chalk Circle' in Amharic

BY DARGIE KAHSAY

Last Thursday evening, the Hall of Hager Fiker Theater was filled to maximum capacity as audiences gathered to witness the stage production, *The Last Judgment* (የመጨረሻው ፍርድ), the Amharic adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's renowned play, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. The production was translated and artistically reinterpreted into Amharic by the celebrated Ethiopian artist Manyazewal Endeshaw. Bertolt Brecht remains one of the most influential German playwrights of the 20th century, whose works continue to shape global theater traditions.

From the opening scene, the performance captivated the audience, unfolding through a carefully orchestrated sequence of theatrical preparations. The production was distinguished by its thoughtful adaptation, disciplined direction, and the deliberate selection of performers whose portrayals brought depth and authenticity to the narrative. Each scene was executed with precision, allowing Brecht's moral and social themes to resonate powerfully with contemporary local realities.

The strength of the performance lay not only in its compelling dialogue but also in its expressive acting, stage design, and emotional pacing. These elements combined to create an immersive theatrical experience that stirred a wide range of emotions among attendees, prompting moments of reflection, joy, and deep emotional engagement. Many audience members were visibly moved, responding strongly to the play's powerful portrayal of justice, humanity, and moral responsibility. Overall, *The Last Judgment* succeeded in transforming a classic work of World Theater into a vivid and emotionally charged stage experience, reaffirming the enduring relevance of Brecht's ideas and the growing sophistication of Ethiopian theatrical art.

According to Addis Ababa Theatre Houses Enterprise Chief Executive Director, Fitsum Zegeye, the production finally reached the stage after months of rigorous rehearsals. More than a performance, the play unfolds as a thoughtful artistic inquiry into enduring human and social questions, inviting audiences into deep moral reflection.



At the core, the production deals with the concept of true justice, probing the fragile boundary between legal judgment and moral truth. Through carefully constructed courtroom scenes and dramatic confrontations, the play challenges audiences to reconsider whether justice is merely a matter of law or a reflection of deeper human values. Equally compelling is the play's exploration of motherhood and sacrifice. In emotionally charged scenes, it raises the timeless question of whether motherhood is defined by biological ties or by compassion, care, and selfless devotion. The performances render this dilemma with sensitivity and intensity, drawing strong emotional responses from the audience.

Beyond individual relationships, the production also serves as a mirror to broader social realities. By portraying human identity, inequality, and social struggle through artistic expression, the play transcends its narrative to offer a critique of society itself. The staging, performances, and dramatic pacing collectively reinforce the play's message, making it both intellectually engaging and emotionally resonant. Ultimately, the production stands as a powerful example of how theater can illuminate complex moral questions while remaining deeply human, reaffirming the enduring role of the stage as a space for reflection, dialogue, and social conscience.

The official inauguration and premiere of *The Last Judgment* at Hager Fiker Theater was attended by government officials, senior diplomats from the Embassy of Germany in Addis Ababa, including the Chargé d'Affaires a.i., as well as the leadership of the Goethe-Institute Addis Ababa and other invited guests. The premiere was organized

by the Goethe-Institute in Addis Ababa in collaboration with the Addis Ababa Theatre Houses Enterprise.

Speaking at the opening ceremony, Fitsum said, "Today we are proud to open a production that continues multiple legacies." Acknowledging the artistic contribution of Manyazewal Endeshaw in adapting the play into Amharic, Fitsum also expressed gratitude to the Goethe-Institute, noting that the production was the result of a strong cultural partnership between the two institutions.

The Last Judgment, written by Bertolt Brecht, the father of epic theater, faithfully reflects Brechtian principles, particularly the purposeful use of music as a dramatic tool rather than mere accompaniment, he said. In this production, specially arranged music plays a key role in shaping the epic structure and guiding audience reflection. The interpretation, led by Dr. Laura Olivi, successfully translates Brecht's theatrical concepts into the context of Ethiopian modern theater, creating a balanced fusion of global dramatic theory and local stage practice. The collaboration between Manyazewal and Dr. Laura made the production both compelling and intellectually engaging for audiences, Fitsum reiterated.

"The collaboration between the Addis Ababa Theatre Houses Enterprise and the Goethe-Institute, as well as the artistic partnership between Manyazewal and Dr. Laura, reflects the importance of cultural exchange, mutual respect, and artistic dialogue between nations," Fitsum said, adding his appreciation to all artists, stage managers, actors, and crew members involved in the production. "Tonight, we do not simply open a play; we

present *The Last Judgment*. This production is more than theater; it is a celebration of history, culture, partnership, and diplomacy between Ethiopia and Germany," he added.

For his part, Dr. Ferdinand von Weyhe, Chargé d'Affaires a.i. of the Embassy of Germany in Addis Ababa, said, "it was wonderful to have *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* by Bertolt Brecht staged here in Addis Ababa, and especially exciting to see it performed in the historic Hager Fiker Theater." He noted that Brecht revolutionized modern theater through the concept of epic theater, which aims to provoke critical thinking and inspire societal change. Recalling his own school experience studying Brecht, Dr. Ferdinand highlighted the playwright's use of the "alienation effect" as a powerful tool to encourage audiences to step back, think, and reflect.

He emphasized that Brecht's works, including *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, are renowned for their poetic language, political depth, and universal themes. The play's reflection on justice, resources, conflict, and humanity transcends geographical, cultural, and historical boundaries. According to him, the central question of the play, who truly deserves ownership, and whether it belongs to those who claim it or those who take responsibility, remains deeply relevant across time and societies.

Dr. Ferdinand further noted that theater has always been, and continues to be, a vital space for dialogue, reflection, and social engagement. "In a world shaped by change and complexity, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* invites us to reconsider ideas of fairness, compassion, social responsibility, and even the nature of law and justice," he said, adding that he was eager to see how the play resonates with Ethiopian audiences.

He concluded by expressing confidence that the production would further strengthen cultural ties between Ethiopia and Germany. Noting that another work by Bertolt Brecht has been staged at Ethiopia's National Theater since 2019, he said the addition of *The Last Judgment* in an Ethiopian context deepens ongoing cultural exchange and mutual understanding between the two nations.