

Kurt Weill Newsletter

VOLUME 32

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FEATURES

Before Blitzstein: The American Odyssey of *The Threepenny Opera*

Jon Alan Conrad on the new recording of *One Touch of Venus*

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Cover photo: Macheath (Michael Park) and Polly (Laura Osnes) celebrate their "wedding" with Mack's gang.
Photo: Kevin Thomas Garcia

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7 East 20th Street

New York, NY 10003-1106

tel (212) 505-5240

fax (212) 353-9663

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Websites

<http://www.kwf.org>

<http://www.threepennyopera.org>

E-mail

Information: kwfinfo@kwf.org

Weill-Lenya Research Center: wlr@kwf.org

Kurt Weill Edition: kwe@kwf.org

SUMMER 2014 PERFORMANCES

Juno (Blitzstein)

TimeLine Theatre Company, Chicago
Nick Bowling, director.
1 May – 27 July

Lady in the Dark

Staatstheater Mainz
Matthias Fontheim, director; Florian Cszimadia, conductor.
17 May – 5 July

Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny

Staatsoper Berlin
Vincent Boussard, director; Wayne Marshall, conductor.
6–25 June

Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny

Rough Magic Theatre Company and Opera Theatre Company, Dublin
Lynne Parker, director; David Brophy, conductor.
13–22 June

Der Zar lässt sich fotografieren

Isny Oper Festival, Germany
Hans-Christian Hauser, director.
26–29 June, Isny; 6 July, Munich; 12 July, Stuttgart

Der Silbersee

Kokkola Opera, Finland
Anu Komsu, director; Sakari Oramo, conductor.
24–27 July

The Seven Deadly Sins

Grant Park Music Festival, Chicago
Carlos Kalmar, conductor; Storm Large, Anna I.
6 August

To learn about the many other Weill performances coming up around the world, view the performance calendar at:

www.kwf.org

EDITORS' NOTE

In 2014 we commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Marc Blitzstein's death and the sixtieth of the opening of his adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* Off-Broadway. The coincidence provides an occasion to consider the profound impact of his American rendering of *Threepenny*, which instantly eclipsed all previous English versions and single-handedly gave Weill's European works a foothold in the U.S. that they have never relinquished. Despite the emergence of several authorized translations since 1954, Blitzstein's remains popular; since 2005, his adaptation has been produced roughly twice as often in the U.S. as all other English versions combined, including a star-studded production this spring at the Atlantic Theater Company in New York, reviewed on p. 13. Mark N. Grant, a leading authority on American musical theater, has written for this issue a history of *Threepenny Opera* in the United States before Blitzstein, to set the stage for his revolutionary adaptation and consider some reasons it succeeded where others had failed. And here's one highlight from our review section: JAY Records has now released the long-awaited complete recording of *One Touch of Venus*, with Melissa Errico, Brent Barrett, and Ron Raines; Jon Alan Conrad, editor of *Venus* for the Kurt Weill Edition, reviews it for us.

The Foundation will undergo a major transition at the end of the summer, when our long-time colleague, Director and Vice President Carolyn Weber, will retire from her full-time duties. Carolyn has spearheaded dramatic expansions of the Lotte Lenya Competition, grants and sponsorships, and other programs since she arrived in 1998, and she has been a source of steadiness and wisdom for so long that it's hard to remember a time when she was not on hand to guide us through challenges great and small. Everyone at the Foundation—and everyone else who has had the privilege of working with her—will feel her absence keenly, and all of us wish her the absolute best. It will not be possible to replace Carolyn, but we are already in the process of hiring new staff to carry on our business and our mission.

Kate Chisholm and Dave Stein

U.S. Premiere of *Road of Promise* Set for May 2015

The Road of Promise, an oratorio adapted by Ed Harsh from *The Eternal Road*, Weill's most challenging stage work, has been announced for next season by Collegiate Chorale in New York, which will mark the premiere of the English version. (The German version, titled *Die Verheißung*, saw its first performance on 28 February 2013 at the Kurt Weill Fest Dessau.) The Chorale will perform the oratorio with the American Symphony Orchestra on 6–7 May 2015 in Carnegie Hall; Artistic Director Ted Sperling will serve as conductor/director. Featured performers include tenor Anthony Dean Griffey as the Rabbi, baritone Mark Delavan as Abraham and Moses, and Broadway actor Danny Burstein as the Adversary.

Except for a few brief spoken passages, Harsh has relied on the original text for the oratorio version, which is designed to give performing groups a way to present music from this vast, legendary work without the difficulty and expense of staging the original, which has been revived only once since its 1937 premiere. The concert version requires a large chorus, five or six vocal soloists, two speaking actors, and orchestra. It combines a story about a modern synagogue under threat of a pogrom with stories from the Old Testament that define Jewish heritage. The oratorio consists of fourteen scenes, in which the congregants, led by their Rabbi, draw strength from the stories of Abraham, Jacob, Rachel, Joseph, Moses, Ruth, David, Solomon, Jeremiah, and others. A thirteen-year-old boy listens to the stories unfold and emerges as the new hope for his people.



Anthony Dean Griffey



Mark Delavan



Danny Burstein



Ted Sperling

Before Blitzstein

The American Odyssey of *The Threepenny Opera*

by Mark N. Grant

Today *The Threepenny Opera* is such a canonical repertory piece, enjoying perennial popularity in a variety of English translations, that it seems as though it has always been a fixture. Yet for its first 25 years, *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928) failed to make a mark anywhere in the English-speaking theater, despite hundreds of successful productions in many languages around the world. This was not the result of neglect. Weill hoped to create and produce an American adaptation of the work, but a Broadway flop in 1933 and the difficulty of attracting the right collaborators kept him from seeing *Threepenny* take its place in U.S. theater history. Just before his untimely death in 1950, a new candidate arose to undertake the adaptation, the one-time Brecht disciple and Weill's long-time rival Marc Blitzstein—creator of *The Cradle Will Rock* and *Regina*—who became in mid-career the adaptor of the book and lyrics for the legendary long-running off-Broadway production of *The Threepenny Opera*. Blitzstein (1905–1964) did more than anybody else, other than Lenya and George Davis, to establish Weill's German works in American theaters and lay the groundwork for a more complete understanding of his *oeuvre*. But it took a “long, long while” to reach that point.

The first English-language production, and the first with the title translated as *The Three Penny Opera* (also rendered *3-Penny Opera*), ran on Broadway for only twelve performances in April 1933. The previous November, Weill had expressed interest in supervising rehearsals. He wrote his publisher Universal Edition on 6 February 1933 about his fears that Brecht would be on hand to influence the production unduly and submerge the score. As late as 14 March, Weill was still hoping to go, but only a week later he fled Germany for Paris. Brecht was already in Switzerland. Neither of them made it to New York.

The producers of this ill-fated American debut were two neophytes, John Krimsky and Gifford Cochran, Jr. (Krimsky's brother Jerrold was co-credited with Cochran as the translator of the 1933 *Threepenny Opera*; he went on to produce a number of musicals on Broadway. Cochran and Krimsky had met by accident at a Paris screening of the 1931 German lesbian film *Mädchen in Uniform*, to which they secured the American rights. They had a penchant for presenting cutting-edge material; after *Mädchen* and *Threepenny* they collaborated on the film version of Eugene O'Neill's play, *The Emperor Jones*, with Paul Robeson.



Poster for the Theater de Lys production, designed by David Stone Martin.

The young producers imported Francesco von Mendelssohn—a cellist, art collector, occasional actor, and descendant of Felix Mendelssohn—to direct their *Threepenny Opera*, even though he knew nothing about American theater.

Broadway in the spring of 1933 was not inimical to musicals with cutting political satire. The Gershwins' *Of Thee I Sing* won the Pulitzer Prize and inspired enough popular demand to open a two-month return engagement on 15 May. Later that year Irving Berlin's and Moss Hart's political revue *As Thousands Cheer* was a hit, running for 400 performances. New York drama critics were certainly familiar with John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, which had landed on Broadway twice in the 1920s, and G.W. Pabst's film version of *Dreigroschenoper* had been screened

in New York two years earlier. So the Krimsky-Cochran *Threepenny Opera* encountered an auspicious climate when it opened on 13 April at the now defunct Empire Theatre. Harold Clurman claimed years later that the production had been insufficiently publicized, but the cognoscenti certainly knew about it. Comedienne Fanny Brice, actor Otis Skinner, dancer Vilma Ebsen, theater owner Martin Beck, producer Billy Rose, and lyricists Irving Caesar and Howard Dietz were all in the audience opening night.

The critics were scathing, many subscribing to the view expressed in the *New Yorker*: “The general effect is that of a show being put on by amateurs.” Percy Hammond (*Herald Tribune*) decried the producers as “dilettantes.” A postmortem in the *New York Sun* commented, “The fact that Bert Brecht's modernization of *The Beggar's Opera* is somber and depressing is no doubt the reason why it was unsuccessful on Broadway. In these days, if people want to be depressed, they can be depressed at home! Why should they pay money to be depressed in the theater?”

The designer used slides to project Brecht's titles, and the actors spoke in Cockney accents. The critic for *Newsweek* observed that “upstage center a representation of a pipe organ stands throughout, behind which the orchestra is concealed. When it is desired to change the scene, a curtain about eight feet high is drawn across the stage and the various flats and props needed are frankly dragged on, usually drowning out the orchestra which meanwhile is playing.” (The use of Brechtian staging devices seems to have been lost on the critics.) He added that Tiger Brown was played by Rex Evans “in flamboyantly effemi-



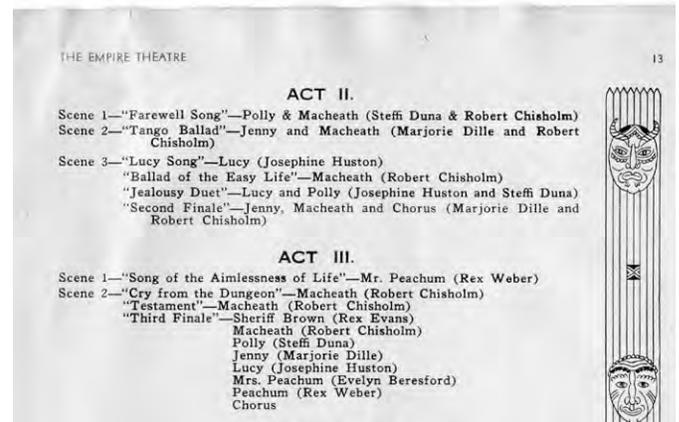
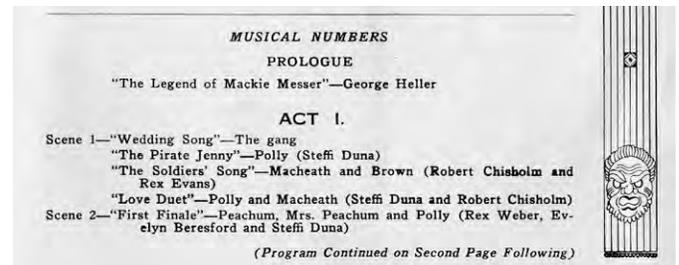
Macheath (Robert Chisholm), Polly (Steffi Duna), and the gang, Broadway, 1933.

nate fashion and the idea of his being called ‘Tiger’ is supposed to raise a laugh.” Tiger Brown rode a large papier-mâché horse onto the stage upon Macheath’s reprieve at the finale. The producers went to some trouble to transplant the original Berlin production rather than adapting it to American tastes.

While no script has been found, it appears that the English translation was inept, if more or less faithful to Brecht’s street language. The *Wall Street Journal* reviewer was not alone in commenting, “I had to clap my hands over my ears to keep out some of the words of the songs.” Burgess Meredith, still in his twenties, appeared as Crooked Finger Jack. Meredith recalls in his memoirs, “The lyrics and the book... were clumsy, with verses like: “For soldiers holsters/Must be their bolsters/From sea to shining sea.” Yet the score was praised by nearly all the reviewers. Gilbert Gabriel of the *New York American*: “Its music is, by all odds and ears, the best thing about *The Three-Penny Opera*. In the modern idiom Mr. Weill has composed a collection of ballads, duets, and finales which are stormily insinuating, mocking, stinging, memo-

rable for their curiously bold, macabre tunefulness, fretting the story with a most interesting and distinguished score. You have heard its equal for originality in precious few operettas of our day.” Still, the net effect was a setback for Weill’s American reputation before he even arrived. Perhaps the production would have been more successful had Weill been present during rehearsals, or had another director taken the helm. When informed in 1937 that Mendelssohn would be directing a French version in Paris, Weill wrote Lenya that he was “an amateur... completely without talent.”

It has been said many times that Weill took no interest in his earlier work once he settled in the U.S. His determination to become fluent in English and attain American citizenship seems to support this contention. But there is abundant evidence that he



The song list from the program, Broadway, 1933.



The beggars, Broadway, 1933.

began pursuing a good English translation and workable American production of *Threepenny* soon after his arrival. Even as he set about creating new works and expanding the frontiers of American musical theater, not to mention adjusting to a new culture, he sought writers, lyricists, and promising production opportunities for his most successful European work, as repeated references in his correspondence demonstrate. The best example dates from 1942 in a letter to director Clarence Muse (see box on p. 6). Although he encountered some interest in *Die sieben Todsünden* and *Mahagonny* in the mid-thirties, *Threepenny*’s flop had thoroughly discouraged producers and directors. But that didn’t daunt Weill in the least.

When preparing *Johnny Johnson* with the Group Theatre in 1936, Weill played songs from *Threepenny* to demonstrate the appropriate singing style to American actors. We don’t know what translations he used, but the songwriter and Gershwin protégée Ann Ronell (“Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf”) recalled in a 1988 interview that Weill had made his

own working English translation of the book and lyrics, giving it to her around 1937 and asking her to improve on it—but this manuscript has not come to light. Ronell also recalled a backer's audition around 1940 for *Threepenny* at New York's City Center that Blitzstein, Bennett Cerf, and Jed Harris attended, at which Weill played the piano and Lenya sang the "Moritat," "Pirate Jenny," and the "Barbara-Song." In the early '40s when the film director Max Ophuls took her to meet Brecht in Santa Monica, Ronell told Brecht that "Kurt had had me write new lyrics."

Ronell also noted efforts at the time to mount an all-black production of *Threepenny* in Harlem. In 1939 and 1940, all-black musicals were big on Broadway: *Swingin' the Dream*, a jazz version of *Midsummer Night's Dream* with Louis Armstrong; Mike Todd's production of *The Hot Mikado* with Bill Robinson; and *Cabin in the Sky* with Ethel Waters. (Weill and Maxwell Anderson tried to get in the act with the abortive musical project *Ulysses Africanus*, a vehicle intended for Paul Robeson.) A letter of Weill's to Louis M. Simon in July 1939 discussed the production possibilities of an English version of *Threepenny* by one Harold Smith for an all-black cast with an improvising jazz band onstage. He expressed doubts about the translation (which he had not yet seen) but left open the possibility that he might participate in a production. Nothing came of it, and the draft translation has not been found.

In 1942 Brecht wrote Weill from California seeking permission for another proposed all-black *Threepenny Opera*, to be supervised by the African-American actor Clarence Muse. The catch was that Muse and company wanted free rein to do whatever they wanted with the music. Brecht got Theodor Adorno to write to Weill to strengthen his case (see "A Letter Surfaces," *Newsletter*, Fall 2003), and Paul Robeson was also recruited to persuade him. Initially Weill agreed, on the condition that the production take place only in California, but he lost patience when Muse failed to send the proposed translation and offered a contract that steamrolled Weill's rights. "I am violently against a revival of *Threepenny Opera* unless we get a really first-rate translation," he wrote to agent Sarah Rollitts in June. "I am quite confident that some day we will get just the right set-up to repeat the enormous European success of this play in this country," he said, adding that he had discussed it with both Charles MacArthur and Marc Connelly. His reply to Adorno chided the notorious intellectual hardliner for his failure to understand Broadway and the American theater, not to mention the work itself: "I know that

Kurt Weill to Clarence Muse, 31 March 1942:

"Let me first tell you that I am very positive about the idea of a negro production of 'Three Penny Opera.' As a matter of fact, it is an old idea of mine and I had worked on several negro versions of this show during the past years. Paul Robson [sic] seemed to have the notion that my score for the 'Three Penny Opera' was for me a thing of the past and that I didn't care particularly what anybody would do with it now. But this is definitely not the case. I consider this score one of the most important things I have done and one of my most valuable 'properties.' Ever since I came to this country seven years ago, I have made a thorough study of the possibilities of a revival of this show which, unfortunately, had been presented in New York in an entirely wrong production. The importance which I attribute to this score and my experience with several attempts at a revival, make it necessary for me to have a number of questions settled before I could give you the 'go ahead' signal on your production."

I [can do] some day a revival of *Dreigroschenoper* on Broadway which would... preserve all the values of the original work..."

Despite the disagreeable Clarence Muse affair, Weill continued throughout the 1940s to search for an effective American version of *The Threepenny Opera*. In a letter to music publisher Max Dreyfus on 31 December 1943, Weill stated that many people had expressed interest in a Broadway production of *Threepenny*. Erwin Piscator wrote to Weill from the New School in 1944 requesting a score and script for *Dreigroschenoper*; in reply the composer wrote back on 2 November, "By the way, there are no good translations of the *Threepenny Opera* songs." In May 1945 Weill wrote Lenya from Los Angeles: "Max [Anderson] suddenly got all excited about the idea of doing an American version of *Dreigroschenoper*, laid in the Bowery around 1900, as a satire on Tammany and the election machin [sic]. We would use only a few songs from *Dreigroschenoper* and write new ones—and I wouldn't give it to Cheryl [Crawford]. I would rather work with the Playwrights [Company]." In a follow-up letter, he told Lenya that Anderson had read the script, "but he just doesn't understand this kind of negative humor." A few months later, another possibility dried up when Cheryl Crawford passed word to Weill that Thornton Wilder had considered translating *Dreigroschenoper* but begged off after reading it: "It's superb reading... But I don't want to do it. It's criticism of society, not human-all-too-human."

A good translation became freshly urgent in 1946. Weill wrote in September to his agent Arthur Lyons, "As to *Threepenny Opera*, the reason that I would like to make a deal for this important property now, is that there will be another modern jazz version of the old *Beggar's Opera* (on which *Threepenny Opera* is based) produced in New York this fall (music by Duke Ellington, book by John LaTouche)... My idea is to make [*Die Dreigroschenoper*] an American period piece, taking place in the New York Bowery around 1890... I think Ben Hecht would be a good man to write it." Weill had recently collaborated with Hecht on *A Flag is Born*; the two were close friends. (The rival work, *Beggar's Holiday*, ran 111 performances but has never been revived on Broadway.)

Apparently Weill was not yet aware that British novelist and translator Desmond Ivo Vesey (1913–1971) had translated the script. Vesey had already translated Brecht's *Dreigroschenroman* and published it in 1937 under the title *A Penny for the Poor*, with verses—including several songs from *Dreigroschenoper*—translated by Christopher Isherwood. (Isherwood's translations are an interesting pre-echo of the faux-Weillian Kander and Ebb musical *Cabaret* (1966), which was a direct descendant of Isherwood's *Berlin Stories* by way of John Van Druten's play *I Am a Camera*.) Vesey's script was used for the first fully staged English-language performance since 1933 by the Illini Theater Guild of the University of Illinois in November 1946. The production dutifully used Brechtian signboards, and the "orchestra" consisted of an electric organ. Brecht expert Eric Bentley spoke on campus during the run. Word got to Weill; he wrote a friend the following year that he would be happy to see *Threepenny Opera* done at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: "I heard pretty good things about a translation which has been used by some middle-western University." According to Lenya, however, Weill disliked the Vesey translation once he read it.

No Chapel Hill production took place, but in February 1948 the Vesey translation was used again for a production by Northwestern University's theater program, though a surviv-

ing script—the first English version that has come down to us—shows that the racier sequences were bowdlerized. A number of students in the cast went on to notable careers in the theater: Joe Bova, Claude Akins, Paul Lynde, and Charlotte Rae (then known as Charlotte Lubotsky) who less than seven years later originated the role of Mrs. Peachum off-Broadway. The orchestra consisted of a piano, a solovox, and a drummer. Again Eric Bentley spoke on campus; Bentley went on to devise his own lyrics which were published with Vesey’s dialogue. Along with Lenya, Marc Blitzstein disdained Bentley’s efforts. As he wrote to Bentley in 1951: “I don’t feel that your lyrics really sing or work with the tunes. I hope you will not be offended at my gratuitous criticism.”

Blitzstein had been performing songs from *Dreigroschenoper* privately for friends and in public lectures for years. He probably first saw the piece in 1929 in Wiesbaden with Aaron Copland. He and Weill shared a low opinion of each other during the thirties, although Blitzstein applauded Weill’s first Broadway effort, *Johnny Johnson* (see “Anatomy of an Adaptation,” *Newsletter*, Spring 2012), but their relationship was never more than dutifully cordial, and Weill seems never to have developed much respect for Blitzstein’s work. By the late forties Blitzstein had begun working on translations of some songs from *Dreigroschenoper* for use in lectures. In 1949 Blitzstein played his new translations for Weill’s friend Maurice Abravanel; Abravanel recommended them but Weill, still uncomfortable with Blitzstein, brushed him off. According to Lys Symonette, Weill expressed his doubts to her about Blitzstein’s project as late as October 1949. Yet Blitzstein claimed he telephoned Weill in January 1950 and persuaded him to listen as he sang his English version of “Seeräuberjenny.” Then, the story goes, Weill gave in at last and encouraged Blitzstein to translate the whole text; his artistic judgment triumphed over his animus. After fifteen years of false starts and dead ends, he may have discerned a real chance at last for a successful American version of *Die Dreigroschenoper*.

Weill’s unexpected death in April 1950 only deepened Blitzstein’s commitment. In a letter of 16 April to Leonard Bernstein, Blitzstein wrote, “I have sunk my teeth into a translation of the whole of the *Dreigroschenoper* as a sort of memorial to Kurt. Folks (Cheryl, Lee Strasberg, Gadg Kazan, etc.) are wildly enthusiastic at the seven songs already completed and it may turn out to be a production.” Over the course of the next few years, Blitzstein kept tweaking the lyrics and went through several drafts of the script, changing the setting from one draft to the next. The



The Threepenny Opera at Northwestern University, 1948.

volume of surviving notes and drafts makes it clear that Blitzstein took great pains with his adaptation. Hannah Arendt heard Blitzstein play through the complete work at Yaddo in February 1952. The New York City Opera announced it would produce the Blitzstein translation that spring but failed to follow through. The first public performance—with the action set in New York’s Five Points slum of the 1870s—was a concert reading with orchestra at Brandeis University’s Festival of the Creative Arts on 14 June 1952. The brand-new festival was the brainchild of Leonard Bernstein, who gave Blitzstein an opportunity to present his adaptation; Bernstein himself conducted while Blitzstein narrated. When Lenya sang “Pirate Jenny,” the ovation was prolonged and deafening. Several Broadway producers expressed interest, but Lenya would not consent to their demands for major changes.

Finally, another pair of novice producers, Carmen Capalbo and Stanley Chase, turned up, promising to stage the piece as written in a small off-Broadway theater in Greenwich Village. The rest is history. The ninth production to occupy the newly restored Theater de Lys, *The Threepenny Opera* (now set in London’s Soho in the 1830s) opened on 10 March 1954, closed after 96 performances to allow a previously leased production to move in, and then reopened 20 September 1955 and ran until December 1961 for a record-setting 2,611 consecutive performances. In the final revision Blitzstein had inserted a reprise of “Mack the Knife” as a coda to the finale—a clever “Broadway touch,” characteristic of the theater savvy Blitzstein brought to his rendering. Both Lenya and Brecht heartily applauded his work. “Marc Blitzstein has come closest to capturing the power of Brecht’s book and lyrics. He has kept the slang and the sting,” Lenya told *Cue* magazine in April 1954. Brecht wrote to Blitzstein in an undated letter, “I consider your adaptation of *Threepenny* magnificent and think very highly of you.” Critics and theatergoers obviously felt the same way.



Leonard Bernstein (left, at podium), Lenya (center, arm raised), and Blitzstein (narrating from desk, right) lead the concert performance of *The Threepenny Opera* at Brandeis, 1952.



L to R: Marc Blitzstein, Stanley Chase, Lotte Lenya, and Carmen Capalbo.



The marquee of the Theater de Lys, where *Threepenny* ran from 1955–1961.



Macheath (Scott Merrill), Polly (Jo Sullivan) and the gang, Theater de Lys, 1954.

The success of *The Threepenny Opera* in the mid-1950s can be partly explained by two larger cultural forces. One was audience taste: the decade or so after the end of the war was a unique era in Broadway history when musicals by “longhair” composers enjoyed commercial success. Gian Carlo Menotti, Weill, Blitzstein, Bernstein, Jerome Moross, Morton Gould, and even Benjamin Britten all saw musicals or operas produced on Broadway during this time. Frank Loesser’s operatic musical *The Most Happy Fella* ran on Broadway for 676 performances from May 1956 until December 1957. And this effect spilled over onto the nascent Off-Broadway scene, where Moross’s *The Golden Apple* and *The Threepenny Opera* both were launched.

Second, Off-Broadway theater (and *Threepenny Opera* in particular) formed the perfect vehicle for bohemian backlash to the McCarthyism of the early 1950s. The Off-Broadway movement is commonly said to have kicked off with Circle in the Square’s 1952 production of Tennessee Williams’s *Summer and Smoke*. But *The Threepenny Opera*’s seven-year run didn’t just make Off-Broadway a commercial force to be reckoned with; it became synonymous with Off-Broadway as a countercultural force, on a par with Greenwich Village, the beatniks, jazz, and many other markers of the new “cool.” A more lasting legacy of the commercial success of the Blitzstein *Threepenny* may have been the license it gave to writers and composers to favor anti-heroes and unsentimental subject matter—a profound change that shows up in the work of Sondheim, Kander and Ebb, and many others for decades thereafter. *Cabaret* and *Chicago* are just two hit musicals influenced directly by Blitzstein’s *Threepenny*, another mark of its lasting legacy.

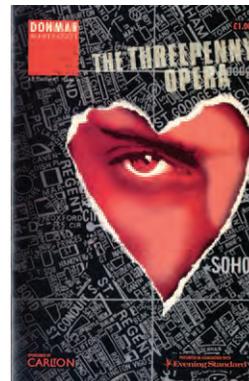
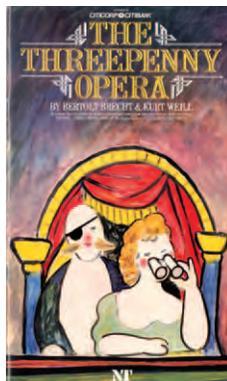
A third factor was the popular success of “Mack the Knife,” first made a hit by Louis Armstrong shortly after *Threepenny* took the stage again in September 1955. Frequent radio play of

several covers of the song undoubtedly drew many spectators to the Theater de Lys. An unheralded catalyst for the cataclysmic success of “Mack the Knife” is Blitzstein’s lyric. The words endow Weill’s eerily tautologous melody with a jaunty, bardic quality, and a grinning-skull-but-not-too-macabre charm, that none of the other translations quite succeeds in rendering. Blitzstein’s sinuous lyrics cemented “Mack the Knife” as the iconic standard that *Billboard*, in 2013, ranked Number Three in its list of Top 100 all-time pop music hits, far ahead of any other song ever composed for a musical. Unique also to Blitzstein is the combination of syllabic dexterity, good phonetic placement, and dripping sardonicism that shows to advantage in his ingenious but less-than-literally-translated lyrics like “you stay perpendicular” (“Barabara-Song”) and “we like our hamburgers raw” (“Army Song”). The acrid sweetness of Blitzstein’s lyrics enhances the acrid sweetness of Weill’s tunes and sings better than some of the more literal English translations of Brecht that were to follow.

Weill scholar David Drew wrote of Blitzstein’s “Mack the Knife”: “Superseded as it has been by more faithful and academically respectable renderings, it remains unmatched in its musicality—its instinctive response to the gist, the gait, and the timbre of Weill’s music.” Nowadays some connoisseurs prefer such “academically respectable” English translations as those of Ralph Manheim and John Willett (premiered at the New York Shakespeare Festival, 1976), Michael Feingold (Broadway, 1989), Robert David MacDonald (National Theatre, London, 1986) and Jeremy Sams (lyrics only, Donmar Warehouse, London, 1994). Directors have plenty of choices; today Blitzstein and the other versions are all frequently revived in English-language productions. But Blitzstein’s adaptation ruled the roost unrivaled for

twenty years, and its startling success paved the way for all its competitors and influenced generations of writers and composers. *The Threepenny Opera*’s place in American theater history is inconceivable without the contributions of Marc Blitzstein.

Threepenny Opera posters and program covers from (L to R): New York Shakespeare Festival (1976, starring Raul Julia), Broadway (1989, starring Sting), National Theatre (1986, starring Tim Curry), and Donmar Warehouse (1994).





2 March 1900 | Kurt Weill born in Dessau.

2 March 1905 | Marc Blitzstein born in Philadelphia.

1921–1923 | Weill studies composition with Ferruccio Busoni in Berlin.

1924–1926 | Blitzstein studies composition with Rosario Scalero in Philadelphia.

1926–1927 | Blitzstein studies composition briefly with Nadia Boulanger (in Paris) and Arnold Schoenberg (in Berlin). He later recounted that he had scandalized Schoenberg by playing songs from *Dreigroschenoper* for the other students, but this could not have been true.

31 August 1928 | Premiere of *Die Dreigroschenoper* in Berlin, which proves to be a runaway hit.

September? 1929 | Blitzstein attends a performance of *Die Dreigroschenoper* in Wiesbaden with Aaron Copland.

4 June 1930 | Broadway premiere of Blitzstein's one-act opera, *Triple Sec*, as part of the Garrick Gaieties revue.

1933–1935 | Blitzstein publishes several disparaging references to Weill's music in *Modern Music* and other journals. A striking example from December 1935: "'J'attends un navire' is about rock-bottom in melodic cheapness."

Late 1934 | Blitzstein meets Weill at his home in Louveciennes and offers to translate *Der Weg der Verheißung* (later staged in New York as *The Eternal Road*). Weill plays portions of the score for Blitzstein, who describes it in *Modern Music* as "Weill's best score, and also his most uneven." Weill describes Blitzstein in a letter as "more a writer about music than a musician" and expresses doubt that he could handle the translation.

10 September 1935 | Weill arrives in New York to prepare for performances of *The Eternal Road*.

November 1935 | Brecht visits New York and meets separately with both Weill and Blitzstein. Blitzstein plays a sketch of "Moll's Song" (later the opening of *The Cradle Will Rock*), and Brecht suggests that he compose an opera on the theme of prostitution as a condition of workers living in a capitalist society.

22 June 1936 | Blitzstein asks Weill for the score of *Die sieben Todsünden* with an eye to arranging a performance. Weill's reply has not survived.

INTERSECTIONS:

A Weill-Blitzstein-Dreigroschenoper Chronology

July 1936 | Weill works with actors from the Group Theatre on *Johnny Johnson*. Blitzstein attends lectures and rehearsals and observes Weill's methods; he comes away with increased esteem for Weill.

15 July 1936 | Blitzstein completes a song for Lenya, "Few Little English." Lenya performs it regularly in a nightclub act in New York in 1938.

August–September 1936 | Blitzstein composes *The Cradle Will Rock*.

19 November 1936 | Broadway opening of *Johnny Johnson*. Blitzstein writes a favorable review in *Modern Music*, which begins, "I have written some harsh things in the past about Kurt Weill and his music. I wish now to say a few good things. He hasn't changed, I have."

16 June 1937 | Controversial premiere of Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*, a surprise success, after the Federal Theatre Project canceled a planned production. Weill feels that Blitzstein's score is imitative, reportedly asking colleagues around New York, "Have you seen my new opera?"

24 October 1937 | Premiere of Blitzstein's radio opera, *I've Got the Tune*, in which Lenya plays *The Suicide*.

1940s | There is little surviving evidence of contact between Weill and Blitzstein during this decade, aside from a few congratulatory opening-night telegrams from Blitzstein to Weill.

Early 1940 | Blitzstein publishes an unfavorable judgment of Weill's incidental music for Elmer Rice's play *Two on an Island* in *Modern Music*.

5 January 1941 | Premiere of Blitzstein's opera, *No for an Answer*, at the Mecca Temple (later City Center) in New York. Despite a cast recording, the opera fails to take off.

23 January 1941 | Broadway premiere of Weill's *Lady in the Dark*, which earns critical acclaim, runs two seasons on Broadway, and tours extensively, cementing Weill's reputation in American theater.

27 April 1942 | Weill informs Blitzstein that the song "Lost in the Stars," composed with Maxwell Anderson in 1939, is not available for performance.

26 December 1947 | *The Cradle Will Rock* is revived on Broadway with full orchestra, conducted by Leonard Bernstein.

Early 1949 | According to Weill's friend and former student Maurice Abravanel, Blitzstein shows him some draft translations of songs from *Dreigroschen-*

oper. When Abravanel recommends them to Weill and Lenya, he is rebuffed.

30 October 1949 | Weill's "musical tragedy," *Lost in the Stars*, opens on Broadway, beginning a run of eight months.

31 October 1949 | Blitzstein's opera *Regina* opens on Broadway, conducted by Abravanel. The work runs only two months despite a number of glowing reviews.

January 1950 | Blitzstein telephones Weill to sing his translation of "Seerüberjenny." Blitzstein later recalls that Weill and Lenya approve and encourage him to translate the complete work.

3 April 1950 | Weill dies unexpectedly. Blitzstein attends the burial on 5 April; immediately afterwards he begins translating "Solomon Song."

15 March 1951 | Blitzstein files an English version of the book and lyrics for copyright, with the action set in New York around 1870.

Spring 1952 | New York City Opera announces a forthcoming production of *Threepenny*, but it does not materialize.

14 June 1952 | First public performance of Blitzstein's adaptation at the Festival for Creative Arts at Brandeis University. The festival is headed by Leonard Bernstein, who conducts the concert performance from Weill's holograph score, with Lenya in the role of Jenny. Several critics applaud Blitzstein's work.

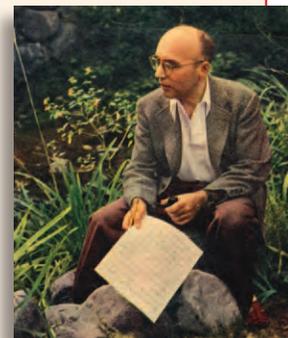
Autumn 1952 | A proposed Decca recording of the score falls through.

8 February 1954 | Producers Carmen Capalbo and Stanley Chase sign a contract to put on *Threepenny* at the Theater de Lys in Greenwich Village, following Lenya and Blitzstein's acceptance of their proposal the previous autumn.

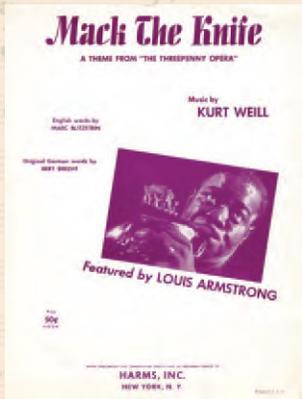
10 March 1954 | Premiere of *Threepenny Opera* at the Theater de Lys. A cast recording follows within a couple of months. The production closes after 96 performances to make room for a previously scheduled play.

3 September 1954 | Lenya refuses to grant Blitzstein exclusivity for his adaptation in all English-language productions. She says only that she has "no right to sign such an agreement."

20 September 1955 | *Threepenny* reopens at the Theater de Lys, beginning a run of 2,611 consecutive performances that ends in December 1961.



Dreigroschenoper Lyrics in English Translation



Blitzstein had his own unique way of dealing with Brecht's lyrics. To illustrate, we present two different songs: "Moritat von Mackie Messer" ("Mack the Knife") and "Seeräuberjenny" ("Pirate Jenny"). The "Moritat" is given in full in Brecht's original and Blitzstein's English, with a literal English translation by Guy Stern which was included with Lenya's recording of *Die Dreigroschenoper* (Columbia, 1958), interposed for reference. For "Pirate Jenny," we've selected the last stanza and provided English versions (in chronological order) by Desmond Vesey, Marc Blitzstein (draft and final version), Ralph Manheim and John Willett, Michael Feingold, and Jeremy Sams, in addition to the original German and Stern's literal translation, to give a sense of how different translators have approached this shattering moment.

Moritat von Mackie Messer / Mack the Knife

Brecht

Und der Haifisch, der hat Zähne,
Und die trägt er im Gesicht,
Und Macheath, der hat ein Messer,
Doch das Messer sieht man nicht.

An 'nem schönen blauen Sonntag
Liegt ein toter Mann am Strand,
Und ein Mensch geht um die Ecke,
Den man Mackie Messer nennt.

Und Schmul Meier bleibt verschwunden,
Und so mancher reiche Mann,
Und sein Geld hat Mackie Messer,
Dem man nichts beweisen kann.

Jenny Towler ward gefunden
Mit 'nem Messer in der Brust,
Und am Kai geht Mackie Messer,
Der von allem nichts gewußt.

Und das große Feuer in Soho,
Sieben Kinder und ein Greis,
In der Menge Mackie Messer, den
Man nichts fragt und der nichts weiß.

Und die minderjäh'ge Witwe,
Deren Namen jeder weiß,
Wachte auf und war geschändet,
Mackie, welches war dein Preis?

Stern (*literal translation*)

And the shark has teeth
And he wears them in his face
And Macheath, he has a knife,
But the knife one does not see.

On a nice, clear-skied Sunday
A dead man lies on the beach
And a man sneaks round the corner
Whom they all call Mack the Knife.

And Schmul Meier disappeared for good
And many a rich man
And Mack the Knife has all his money
Though you cannot prove a thing.

Jenny Towler was found
With a knife stuck in her chest;
At the docks Macheath is walking
Who doesn't know a single thing.

And in Soho, the great fire
Did in seven kids and one old man—
In the crowd's Mack the Knife, who
Isn't quizzed and knows nothing at all.

And the widow, still a minor,
Whose name is known to all
Woke up and got raped;
Mack, what was the price to pay?

Blitzstein

Oh, the shark has pretty teeth, dear,
And he shows them pearly white.
Just a jackknife has Macheath, dear,
And he keeps it out of sight.

On the sidewalk Sunday morning
Lies a body oozing life.
Someone's sneaking 'round the corner.
Is the someone Mack the Knife?

Louie Miller disappeared, dear,
After drawing out his cash.
And MacHeath spends like a sailor.
Did our boy do something rash?

Sloppy Sadie was discovered
With a knife wound in her thigh.
And Macheath strolls down on Dock Street
Looking dreamy at the sky.

Big explosion at the market
Twenty people blown to death.
In the crowd stands wide-eyed Mackie,
Only slightly out of breath.

There was rape down by the harbor;
Little Susie caused a stir
Claiming that she'd been assaulted.
Wonder what got into her?

Seeräuberjenny / Pirate Jenny – Final Stanza

Brecht

Und es werden kommen hundert gen Mittag an Land
Und werden in den Schatten treten,
Und fangen einen jeglichen aus jeglicher Tür
Und legen in Ketten und bringen vor mir,
Und fragen, "Welchen sollen wir töten?"
Und an diesem Mittag wird es still sein am Hafen,
Und man fragt, wer wohl sterben muß.
Und dann werden Sie mich sagen hören: "Alle!"
Und wenn dann der Kopf fällt, sag' ich: "Hoppla!"
Und das Schiff mit acht Segeln
Und mit fünfzig Kanonen
Wird entschwinden mit mir.

Blitzstein (undated draft, transcribed from
Blitzstein papers at Wisconsin Center for Film and
Theater Research)

By noontime the dock *pier* is a *all* swarmin with men,
Comin off of that ghostly freighter.
And they're steppin in and out of each shadowy tree-
movin in the shadows where no one can see
And they're grabbing up people, and bringin them to me,
Askin me, "Kill them now or later?"
That'll be the day it's so still in harbor
You can hear the *a* fog horn from miles away—
In the middle of the hush, I'll tell them:
In that silence you will hear me answer
Why wait? *Right now.*
And when they dump them *'em* in the water: *I'll say:*
"That'll teach you."
And that ship, the black freighter,
Disappears out to sea—
And on it—is me.

Manheim & Willett

And a hundred men will land in the bright midday sun
Each stepping where the shadows fall.
They'll look inside each doorway
and grab anyone they see
And put him in irons
and then bring them to me
And they'll ask: "Which of these should we kill?"
In that noonday heat
there'll be a hush round the harbor
As they ask which has got to die.
And you'll hear me as I softly answer:
"The lot!"
And as the first head rolls I'll say: "Hoppla!"
And that ship with eight sails and
All its fifty guns loaded
Will vanish with me.

Stern (literal translation)

And towards noon hundreds will come on land
And they'll walk in the shadows
And from every doorway they will seize everyone
And put them in chains and bring them to me.
And ask me: "Which one should we kill?"
And this noon it'll be still by the harbor
When they ask, who will have to die.
And then you'll hear me say: "All of 'em!"
And when then the heads roll, I'll say: "Hoop-la!"
And the ship with eight sails
And with fifty cannons
Will vanish with me.



Lenya singing
"Pirate Jenny" in
the Theater de Lys
production.

Feingold

They'll be landing by the hundreds as soon as it's light
And hide where none of you can see 'em.
They'll run in ev'ry door
and grab the first man they see,
They'll throw them in chains
and they'll drag them to me
And ask me: "Should we kill 'em or free 'em?"
As the clock strikes noon
there's not a sound in the harbor
When they ask which ones have to die.
And then loud and clear you'll hear me saying:
"All of 'em!"
And when your heads roll, I'll say: "Whoops there!"
And that fifty-gun galleon
Keeps it eight sails a-waving
Till it's vanished with me.

Vesey

And at midday you will see a hundred men come ashore
Who will search the shadows so still now.
And they'll capture every single living person
they can see
And put them in chains and bring them to me
And ask: "Which of these shall we kill now?"
And when the sun stands at noon
there'll be a hush down by the harbor
When they ask me which shall be the ones to die.
And then you'll hear me saying to them: "All o' them!"
And when their heads fall I shall say: "Hoppla!"
And the ship with eight sails
And with fifty great cannon
Will sail homewards with me.

Blitzstein (final version)

By noontime the dock is all swarmin' with men
Comin' off of that ghostly freighter.
They're movin' in the shadows where no one can see
And they're chainin' up people and bringin' them to me,
Askin' me: "Kill 'em now or later?"
Noon by the clock, and so still on the dock,
You can hear a foghorn miles away.
In that quiet of death, I'll say: "Right now."
And they pile up the bodies, and I'll say:
"That'll learn you."
Then the ship, the black freighter
Disappears out to sea,
And on it—is me.

Sams

By the break of day the attack's underway
And the morning is as grey as slate.
There's screaming in the streets
where the town used to be
And they'll round up the stragglers
and they'll drag them to me,
And they'll want me to pronounce my sentence.
And the men wait to hear their fate.
There's a very satisfying hush in the sky
As they wait to hear who's going to die . . .
And they're up against the wall so I say,
"Shoot them all"
And when the shooting's stopped I say, "Yes!"
And my comrades will row me
To the ship in the harbor
And I'll take command.

Reports from the Field: Two Approaches to *The Threepenny Opera*

Atlantic Theater Company

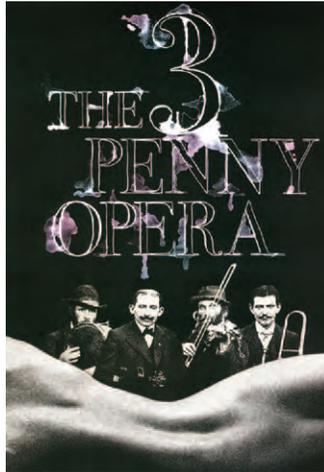
by Michael Leibenluft

Martha Clarke's production of *The Threepenny Opera* opens with a rather grotesque scene. A pudgy English Bulldog licks the thigh of an unconscious woman; Macheath lifts the woman's skirt with his cane to conduct his own inspection of her nether regions as the Street Singer launches into "Mack the Knife." Clarke modeled this moment on a drawing by Rudolf Schlichter. Her approach to the *The Threepenny Opera* was driven by her research into film and visual art of the 1920s and 30s, notably George Grosz, Otto Dix, Schlichter, and Brassai. In her conception, visual imagery created by stage compositions becomes the text and the story. She describes how her work challenges the emphasis on language typical of many theatrical productions:

The audience responds to the use of space and light in a visceral way that's not language....Mostly in theater people want to reduce everything to the book. And there's a lot of power, space, and rhythm in more abstract notions that are elements of putting the theater piece together...and I have more trust in [the] non-verbal than the verbal...I feel what we did [in this production] was connect the dots to celebrate the music.

Many directors initiate rehearsals with several days of "table work," in which cast members dissect the language of a piece to uncover intricacies of character and situation. But Clarke works from visual instinct in the rehearsal room, shaping and reshaping scenes according to what she finds stimulating or satisfying. She cut nearly a third of the dialogue to create space for non-verbal movement sequences that enrich the world of the play.

Clarke credits G.W. Pabst's 1931 film version of *Threepenny* as her inspiration. She notes that "the storytelling is much clearer" than in the stage script, and she believes Pabst's lush imagery and attention to gesture render the characters "more three-dimensional." Other masterpieces from the era also served as models, including Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse* films. Clarke constructed spaces on stage by shifting the orientation of a Victorian sofa and other pieces of furniture. She sees this device as highly cinematic, allowing the audience to "always look at the same pieces from different angles."



A new program, **The Kurt Weill Fellowship**, administered by the Stage Directors and Choreographers Foundation and funded by the Kurt Weill Foundation, provides the opportunity for an early-career director or choreographer to observe or assist a master director or choreographer on a production of a stage work by Weill or Marc Blitzstein. This spring, the Foundation sponsored two observers for new productions of *The Threepenny Opera*: Atlantic Theater Company in New York, directed by Martha Clarke; and Signature Theatre in Arlington, Va., directed by Matthew Gardiner. (Reviews of the productions may be found on pp. 13 and 14.) Excerpts from their reports are presented here.

Signature Theatre

by Paige Kiliany

Director Matthew Gardiner asked me not only to be the assistant director but also the dramaturg for the show. I had had prior experience with Brecht and love *The Threepenny Opera*, but had never worked on a full production of a Weill/Brecht piece. Matt had me research Weill and Brecht, their collaborations and philosophies, the history of *Threepenny* and *The Beggar's Opera* (the source for *Threepenny*), and contemporary wealth disparity in the United Kingdom and the United States. I admire and appreciate Brecht and Weill's pursuit of theater that has a social purpose beyond mere entertainment and strives to inspire its audience politically and to question the status quo. Working on this show inspired me to do more of Weill and Brecht's work in the future. Their pieces continue to be classic and relevant and contemporary at the same time.

The rehearsal process for *The Threepenny Opera* was very enlightening. This is a difficult show and most of the actors had never done Brecht before, so they needed a lot of guidance from Matt, who was able to deal with the unique needs of each actor. I really admire the way Matt ran a rehearsal room; he's supportive and fun, but also very confident, honest, and strong. He had a very clear idea of what he wanted particular moments of the show to look and feel like.

The production was modern and felt very real to current audiences, but was created with a reverence for the legacy of *Threepenny* and the weight that legacy carries. In our rehearsals, Matt had really stressed the significance of *Threepenny* for Signature's audiences. Some audience members were not sure what to make of the show because they had never seen anything as political as *Threepenny* and were used to lighter, newer musicals. Matt and the Signature staff were aware that this would happen, but the response was overwhelmingly positive and everyone involved in the production was strongly motivated to make this production bold, not watered down. The show received excellent reviews and everyone who worked on it was very proud.

