

“Lenya, You’re Always Epic Enough for Me”

by
Guy Stern

He was one of the most amazing directors I have ever met, and I have met a few good ones in my career. I think his genius for directing equalled his genius as a playwright and poet. For instance, when I sang the first song for him “Oh Moon of Alabama,” I, with my good solid ballet school training, started and evidently made a few gestures which he considered too balletic, and he told me, “Lenya, darling, don’t let’s be so Egyptian,” and with a slight touch he just turned my hand round, and it became a famous gesture of mine which I have kept all my life. This was his way of just touching you and, without taking away anything of your personality, he brought out whatever was there.¹

- Lotte Lenya



Lotte Lenya in New City, May 1981. All photos by Ted Mitchell.

This article is an excerpt from a keynote paper entitled “Lenya’s Creative Interpretation of Brecht,” written for the International Brecht Symposium, “Brecht Unbound,” University of Delaware, March 1992. It is reprinted here with the kind permission of the University of Delaware Press, which will publish the complete essay in a forthcoming volume of papers from the conference. Guy Stern is a Distinguished Professor at Wayne State University and a Trustee of the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music.

Lenya’s mastery of Brechtian gesture has been singled out repeatedly for praise by critics ranging from Walter Mehring to Fritz Raddatz. Mehring writes of the actress [emphasis added] Lotte Lenya, after the Paris premiere of *Die sieben Todsünden* that she “framed the ballads with monotonous trenchancy, ascetically sparse in delivery and gesture...”² Fritz Raddatz, in a piece written on the occasion of her death, recalled, “Her voice remains in our ear, her intonation, her gestures. There it is, the Brechtian word. Is it possible to sing in an epic manner? I think Lenya did.”³ Years earlier, the *Frankfurter Rundschau* had noted, again referring to Lenya the actress, “How truly Brechtian her southern German intonation, the sweet sobriety of her reactions, the intelligence in how she speaks, her finely delineating, spare, not at all routine use of gesture.”⁴ When she was complimented on how she used gestures, she responded with typical modesty that it wasn’t difficult; everything seemed so natural, including the gestures. “Brecht had the patience of Job with me.”⁵

When Lenya commented on other central aspects of Brechtian theater, she did not always make a sharp distinction between epic theater and the alienation effect. But she had, almost from the outset, a natural affinity for epic theater; “She still has Brecht in her blood,” observed a Hamburg newspaper as late as 1980.⁶ Or, to quote again from the sensitive piece written by Fritz Raddatz, “Her voice, her performance were always also telling the story of something that had happened, and thus ‘epic’ in the sense of Brechtian dramaturgy.”⁷ She was particularly good at the epic manner, or to put it more simply, being able to tell a story. When she described her parents’ apartment in a Viennese housing project, her words conjured up almost sensuously the stale kitchen smell that hung in the stairway. Few physical descriptions of Brecht are as graphic and persuasive as this verbal portrait:

BRECHT...as seen by Lenya

Average height, skinny, with the frailness of a zäher Hering (tough herring); small white feminine hands that were invariably grimy with short black fingernails, moved with a swift elegance, very precise; his shoulders a little stooped; stringy neck, with a tic that went with his talk that started in his jaw, drew in his upper lip with the lower lip tightening over it,

pushed forward the chin, tightened the stringy neck muscles, and set his shoulders alternately twitching...dull brown hair cropped Russian proletarian style...dark brown eyes set very close together, deeply sunk in, never still, constantly blinking, always registering his reaction to whatever is being said...bushy eyebrows, separated by two deep furrows, that sank even deeper in thought...a narrow and slightly hooked nose...thin-lipped, with moist brown spittle at the ends, from the stogies that he smoked all day long; they went out for stretches of time, when he was writing or busy with something...never went to the dentist, so he had wretched teeth, many of them black stumps...most of the time had a stubble on his face...baffling way of looking almost neat.

Brecht spoke with a Bavarian accent, which gave a softening lilt to his speech...His normal manner of speaking was not a hurried one but in the grip of an idea became sharp, strident and theatrical...He would then stride back and forth, continuously gesturing, with a great variety of gestures, always translating into terms of theatre...

In his manner a polite man, a calculated politeness, a shy social lion who could become a raging one promulgating his own theories of theatre...In general, however, people had to come to him, and he preferred to move within the confines of his own group...He loved gim [sic] rummy, American movies, sometimes played old songs and his own ballads on his guitar, which he played not at all well, and sang agreeably and amateurishly...Back of all his maneuvers, back of all the charm, a gnawing concern for his own myth, and forever assessing people for what they could contribute to him (and invariably getting it)...Soundless laughter could shake him, with an endearing peasant way of slapping his thin leg, ending in exhausted pants and rubbing his eyes like a sleepy child, repeating, "Ja, das Leben..."¹⁸

There is little agreement when it comes to Lenya's attitude toward Brecht's alienation effect. Indeed, Lenya's oft-voiced opinion that there was a gap between Brecht's theories and his practical theatrical work referred primarily to the Brechtian alienation technique. Frequently - and more than once in my presence - she repeated what she had been told about the Berlin premiere of *Mutter Courage* on 11 January 1949:

The premiere was an enormous success. Weigel, in the main role, had almost all of the audience in tears. Frenetic applause, surreptitious handkerchiefs. Brecht was outraged. "That's théâtre [sic], not alienation!" The next evening the performance went according to Brecht's instructions. No handkerchiefs this time, nor wild applause. And Brecht didn't like that, either. He said that one could, after all, keep some of the emotional power of the premiere performance. And that's what happened.⁹

From this and from other observations made while working together with Brecht, Lenya concluded that the theoretician did

not always want to be taken at this word. Her opinion was no doubt somewhat influenced by Weill's private views. Felix Jackson, in his as-yet unpublished memoirs, recalls a conversation with Kurt Weill that took place in August 1929, while *Happy End* was being completed, in a sidewalk café on Kurfürstendamm:

"What about his [Brecht's] theories" [I asked].

"What theories?" "The epic theatre, the alienation?"

Kurt Weill laughed softly.

"I listen to it and I agree. Why shouldn't I?"



It had nothing to do with me. And he doesn't take it that seriously himself. Brecht says that the actor should step out of his character to do a song. There should be a definite separation between the dialogue scenes and the musical numbers. There's nothing new in that. As soon as an actor opens his mouth to sing, he's out of character. He transfers from one medium to another. That's enough separation."¹⁰

This implication that Brecht did not take his own theories overly seriously is found repeatedly in Lenya's statements to the press.

At a time when every syllable that Brecht ever uttered is taken with deadly earnestness, the arrival in London of Weill's widow, Lotte Lenya, to lead the current Royal Court production of Brecht on Brecht is certainly opportune. For Miss Lenya has always reminded Brecht's disciples that he himself never stuck to a rigid interpretation of his works. She tells those who regard his every pronouncement as sacrosanct that his plays cannot properly be understood without an intimate knowledge of his personality and the circumstances that led him to express the ideas that he held. Above all she feels that commentators have missed the sheer fun in his work.¹¹

In another interview, she made fun of the Brecht cult at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, where every comment by the master was noted and treated as a sacred command.¹²

She was particularly opposed to a systematic alienation effect, although she herself, with her understated performing style, was quite capable of introducing alienation into her performance. But in her opinion, alienation was inappropriate for certain Brecht plays and scenes, and the radical alienation championed by some Brecht disciples was, according to her, based on a misunderstanding. She also made this clear in an interview with a journalist in California:

Miss Lenya tried to clarify a few misconceptions. She feels that Brecht can be done successfully in this country and is enthusiastic about the talent of American actors, not so with directors. "Directors in this country misinterpret his alienation theory. No matter how you try to alienate yourself from the part or the audience from feeling, you can't stop the tears, because of the situation itself. It has to be played as written. There is a danger of being too flat in trying to achieve alienation. In the Berlin Ensemble when Brecht is done, the audience cries, there is just as much emotion as in any other. When Americans approach a part, there is too much analyzing, it is all too cerebral. They pick it apart instead of just diving in. They shouldn't think so much of alienation or style, but absorb it, play it. American actors ooze talent, but there is a lack of good directors. For the sake of novelty, directors destroy theatre."¹³

As in an epic Brecht play, we return now to the point of departure. When I call Lenya an interpreter of Brecht, I am referring primarily to her rhetorical and theatrical interpretation of Brechtian texts. It should be noted that her performances were often controversial. With the help of recordings and videotape, we can even today assess the extent to



which Lenya's performance is in accord with our conception of Brechtian theater.

There seems to be agreement among the critics on one aspect of her interpretation of Brecht: she was incomparable in her recitation of Brecht's poetry. Even George Tabori, who fired off a subtly malicious piece at the time of her death, remarked, for example, that "her choice of men was also mysterious: Weill, a clumsy, balding Jew, was not exactly Prince Charming." Nor was he reluctant to damn her acting ability - "She was not an actress, not even a performer or chanteuse" - but even he admired her as a skilled reader for she was:

...a wonderful interpreter of Brechtian poetry; she read some poems, such as "An die Nachgeborenen," better than the great Giehse, although she read it in English, in my half-baked translation; perhaps because she, unlike Giehse, remained in exile until the end of her life, a stranger in a world that she had not made.¹⁴

And the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* observed:

She never flagged in her respect for Brecht and her commitment to him on two continents...Wherever possible, she made Brecht's poetry heard: at concerts at Carnegie Hall, among other places on the [Mathieu and Stern] record "Invitation to German Poetry."¹⁵

Lenya appeared in three Brecht plays that challenged the actress at least as much as the singer. They will be discussed below in chronological order. In such early Weill-Brecht works as *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Mahagonny*, however, praise was heard for the novice actress. Brecht's severest critic Alfred Kerr immediately recognized the talent of the actress, who had been left off the playbill inadvertently: "Jenny - who was that? She was good. She was very good indeed. She will soon be front-and-center stage..."¹⁶ And Hugo Leichentritt, the well-known critic for the periodical *Die Musik*, commented after the Berlin premiere of *Mahagonny* that "Lotte Lenya has considerable talent as an actress."¹⁷

She told me more than once (and Gottfried Wagner as well) that Anna I in *Die sieben Todsünden* was her favorite role. The review by Mehring, quoted above, of the Paris world premiere also underscored the key position of Lenya in this un-ballet-like ballet: "Lotte Lenja as the speaker holds the episodes together with her unusual energy."¹⁸ I personally accompanied Lenya to one of the first New York performances. I was not familiar with it; she explained to me that she viewed the dancing as yet another way of propagating basic Brechtian ideas. In an interview with *Aufbau* she added:

Die sieben Todsünden is not a ballet, but a play. A kind of singing, dancing, penny-dreadful ballad. But it was such a hit even

among ballet-lovers that it was added to the repertoire.¹⁹

What struck me, among other things, about that performance was Lenya's magnetism on stage. While Allegra Kent, then one of the most talented ballerinas at the New York City Ballet Company, performed a dare-devil modern dance, requiring at times some hazardous acrobatics, Lenya remained her equal as a stage presence - *this time* creating a complete alienation effect: or rather, she was involved in what was happening and commented on it at the same time. She seemed to float above her role; or, as the critic for the *Evergreen Review* put it at the time, "Miss Lenya is singing, Miss Kent will dance. And both will act: but that means *act*." [Emphasis in original]²⁰

Near the end of the multi-year, record-breaking run of *The Threepenny Opera* at the Theater De Lys in New York, Lenya joined the touring production of *Brecht on Brecht*, conceived by George Tabori.²¹ Lenya was not particularly happy with the motley pastiche; for her, the Brechtian was missing from this Brecht collage. As she told Bernard Weintraub of *The New York Times*,

*It was an unfortunate production...It was a mishmash, so many different styles. An actor needs training in Brecht, a knowledge of him. The production here didn't have that. It was not very Brechtish.*²²

At most of the performances, her involvement was limited to songs and poems; sometimes she also played the part of the Jewish wife in the scene of the same name in *Private Lives of the Master Race*.²³ As one might have expected, she reaped further praise in the college and university towns of the United States. "She projected within a few minutes the plight of a people under tyranny," wrote Armand Gebert, the *Detroit News* correspondent.²⁴ "Most moving of all," observed the *Minneapolis Star*.²⁵ The theater critic of the *Cincinnati Post & Times Star* seemed to discern no trace of alienation:

*The soaring humanist qualities of Brecht are especially apparent in the final act. "The Jewish Wife" is a tour de force for Miss Lenya. Miss Lenya compels us to identify with the wife who must leave Nazi Germany because the situation is becoming "more uncomfortable." The sad phone calls to friends to end relationships and the final hurt of realizing her non-Jewish husband is willing to sacrifice their love is sensitively portrayed by Miss Lenya.*²⁶

This particular scene, however, like Brecht's plays within a play, has an inherent alienation effect resulting not only from how it is performed, but also from its very structure and content. Before her husband returns, the Jewish wife practices, in monologue form, the dialogue she is likely to

have with him later. This is most definitely a distancing situation: the action is foreshadowed by a rehearsal anticipating the actual event.

Lenya's most vehement protest was directed toward the alienation effect in staging *Mother Courage*. She based her position on Brecht's own ambivalence, described above, as well as on a talk with him in East Berlin when the possibility was first raised that the play might be staged with her taking on the title role.

The last time Lotte Lenya saw Brecht, "we worked on *Mother Courage* for two days," she says. "He said to me, 'Lenya, if it ever goes to America, I want you to play it.' Of course, when it did come, Anne Bancroft played it. They wanted a name, you know, and it's no use fighting Tammy [sic] Hall. Though it wasn't her fault the play didn't work, it was not well produced."²⁷

Lenya, when she did play the role, avoided the alienation effect inherent in the songs in *Mother Courage*; on the contrary, she attempted to integrate them into the action: "And it was also noteworthy," wrote one critic, "that she did not depart from Brechtian style even in those songs which would have allowed her to present herself as the star Lotte Lenya."²⁸ Lenya came to this role after feeling drawn to it for many years - "I've always wanted to play her, and I think I'm right for the part"²⁹ - as well as with definite ideas about how it should be acted. First of all, no alienation effect. She explained this to an interviewer in California, where she had again taken on the role, this time at a college theater and with a student company:

*Mother Courage should certainly grab its audience and not let them go. "It's a devil of a part to learn," says Lenya, (it actually has more lines than Hamlet). "But it's a marvelous part, such scope of emotion and humor, and the tragedy in the end. It's a holiday for an actress. And after you see the play, you leave the theatre weeping because of what happened to Mother Courage and her children. No alienation is possible."*³⁰

She also referred repeatedly to the keyword "humor," a concept that she took seriously and succeeded in achieving: "Mother Courage has to have a sense of humor or she could not survive a day."³¹

Moreover, she emphatically rejected Helene Weigel's reservation that she was "not maternal enough" for the role. She felt that the play's emphasis was more on courage, and less on the mother. "That was just what Brecht did not want. Of course Mother Courage is maternal, but that is certainly not her most important characteristic."³²

Rather, her aim was to realize the inherent symbolism of the role:

I am moving away from naturalism toward a more symbolistic approach - real, rather than realistic. I feel I can better move

*the audience by the tightening of the production, the poetry of it, the humanity of it, rather than by a highly presentational performance where actors evolve as representative puppets of Brecht. It's the toughest play I've ever done."*³³

When it came to Lenya's view of the proper interpretation, an interpretation reflected in her performance, there was disagreement finally among serious critics. There were, of course, those who could not accept any new kind of interpretation that went beyond the model provided by Weigel or Therese Giehse.³⁴ And there was the usual amount of half-baked, sometimes glib commentary in the daily press. After the premiere, the headline of one newspaper read, "Mother Courage fights and survives like a hyena"; another announced, "Lotte Lenya is no hyena."³⁵

Some critics of both the Buckwitz production in Recklinghausen and the California production saw precisely the successful realization of her intention as un-Brechtian. Johannes Jacobi, for one, wrote in *Die Zeit*, "Mother Courage is most moving in her personal misery: a figure who evokes sympathy and tears, not anger and disgust. Poor B.B."³⁶ A similar view was put forth by the *Frankfurter Rundschau*:

*Indeed, Lotte Lenya had to do it her way. That was clearly an effort...When she appears, lively and energetic and with fox-red hair tucked under a knit cap, at the start of the play, and then, abandoned, miserable, gray and old, broken in body and soul, she [and her wagon] rolls off into the dark, she always has our sympathy...All of that was very "moving," and sometimes, for example in the case of the lullaby for the dead Katrin, it was indeed piteous and no doubt provoked among the audience that profound sympathy that epitomized exactly that which, in line with the author's didactic intent, should not be felt."*³⁷

Dan Sullivan of the *Los Angeles Times* found Lenya's *Mother Courage* too tame:

*Miss Lenya doesn't do or say anything that makes us feel uncomfortable, that suggests she might be a war criminal of a sort, too. Morally, she's clean - a sharp-tongued but basically delightful old gal who is just trying to get by."*³⁸

But equally qualified critics argued that Lenya was, rather, reinforcing Brecht's main intentions. As Anne Rose Katz put it:

Buckwitz succeeded in putting the spotlight on the dangerous and evil, and on Brecht's indictment of war. The striking casting of the cabaret performer Lotte Lenya, Weill's widow, in the title role underscored this aspect. She



Notes

was less a mother than a hyena of the battlefield, an emaciated and tough survivor of a hundred battles. Her final scene had the greatness of a tragedienne; the other scenes suffered from a certain amount of monotony in their dialogue.

Still, Lenya was generally convincing in the sparseness of her delivery; she allowed evil to seep in, as if by chance, and in so doing achieved a more profound effect than, for example, she would have had by carefully serving up the key lines.³⁹

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* as well saw anti-militarism as one of Brecht's main theses, one that was underscored by Lenya's conception of her role:

Harry Buckwitz directed the play with dedication and great precision; and in so doing he overloaded the so-called "epic theater" with long, long passages and pauses to such an extent that unbiased members of the audience might, with a yawn, lay the blame in the lap of poor BB. Not until later, as *Mother Courage's* cart was rolling farther and farther into the muck and Lotte Lenya, no longer dependent on the cues of her partners, retreated more and more into herself, when Brecht showed his conclusions more clearly, did renewed enthusiasm come over the audience.⁴⁰

At the time one view clashed with another. But there can be no doubt that Lenya was acting in a very deliberate manner. Each performance in Recklinghausen was followed by a discussion with the audience. Lenya observed, "I must say I was tremendously impressed by the young [Germans]. Every night after *Mother Courage* we had forums, 50 kids brought in by bus. They knew every line of *Mother Courage* better than I did and you had better be on your toes."⁴¹

Even today opinions would be divided. Fortunately, that production, reviving much of the picaresque spirit of Grimmelshausen's original, was videotaped, and those who are interested can make up their own minds.⁴² It is regrettable that Brecht was not able to see it, so we will never know what his response would have been. But is there perhaps some indication in the fact that the first telegram of condolence to reach Lenya upon the death of Kurt Weill came from Brecht, coupled with an invitation to join the company of the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm?⁴³ As for Lenya's interpretation of Brecht, then, we come back again to his exhortation: Curtain up and all questions open!

1 "Brecht and I: Lotte Lenya talks to Irving Wardle," *The London Observer*, 9 Sept. 1962, p. 16.

2 Walter Mehring, "Ein neuer 'Brecht-Weill,'" *Das neue Tagebuch* (Paris-Amsterdam), July 1933, pp. 24-5.

3 Fritz Raddatz, "Gestischer Gesang," *Die Zeit*, 4 Dec. 1981, p. 50.

4 "Lotte Lenyas Courage: Harry Buckwitz inszenierte den zweiten Abend der Ruhrfestspiele," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 15 June 1965, p. 7.

5 "Die Lenya blieb die Lenya: Zu Besuch in Frankfurt. Heute tritt sie beim Brecht-Abend auf," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 Feb. 1973, p. 35.

6 M.R., "Sie hat noch immer den Brecht im Blut," *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 18/19 Oct. 1980, p. 9.

7 Raddatz, op. cit.

8 "Brecht...as seen by Lenya" from the notes taken by George Davis. Weill-Lenya Research Center, New York.

9 Lenya first voiced this opinion to me during the recording session of *Invitation to German Poetry*, 1958.

10 The typescript of Felix Jackson's unpublished autobiography forms part of the Weill-Lenya Research Center.

11 "Lenya on Brecht," *Plays and Players*, Oct. 1962, p. 7.

12 "The Brecht Lotte Lenya Knew," *Times* (London), 2 Feb. 1961, p. 7.

13 Selma Tiktin, "Interview with Lotte Lenya" unpublished, in the Weill-Lenya Research Center.

14 George Tabori, "Die Letzte der grossen alten Huren," *Theater Heute*, March 1982, p. 53.

15 "Die Lenya blieb die Lenya: Zu Besuch in Frankfurt. Heute tritt sie beim Brecht-Abend auf," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 Feb. 1973, p. 35.

16 Alfred Kerr's review appeared in the *Berliner Tageblatt*, 1 Sept. 1928, p. 15.

17 Hugo Leichentritt, "Das Musikbild der Gegenwart: Oper-Berlin," *Die Musik* 24 (5 Feb. 1932): 360-3.

18 Mehring, op. cit.

19 Vera Craener, "Besuch bei Lotte Lenya," *Aufbau* (New York), 9 Jan. 1959, pp. 9-10.

20 Jerry Tallmer, "The Seven Deadly Sins," *Evergreen Review* 9 (Summer 1959): 200-7.

21 Tabori's "improvisation" appeared later in book form. See his *Brecht on Brecht* (London, New York: S. French, [1967]).

22 Bernard Weintraub, "Lenya on Weill: The memory lingers on," *The New York Times*, 25 Oct. 1964, p. 41.

23 See Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke*, "Furcht und Elend des III. Reiches" III, pp. 1073-193.

24 Armand Gebert, "Brecht on Brecht: liable to bite," *Detroit News*, 27 Nov. 1963.

25 John K. Sherman, "Brecht wave

splashes high in Lotte Lenya performance," *Minneapolis Star*, 4 Nov. 1963.

26 Jerry Stein, "Brecht is Brought into Focus," *Cincinnati Post and Times Star*, 7 Feb. 1970, p. 17.

27 Sylvie Drake, "Lotte Lenya - For her more of the usual unusual," *New Brunswick (NJ) Daily Home News*, 28 Nov. 1971, p. 8.

28 Wilhelm Unger, "Lotte Lenya gibt keine Hyäne," *Kölner Stadtanzeiger* 137, 1965. Found as a clipping in the Weill-Lenya Research Center.

29 "Lotte Lenya ist Star an der Ruhr," *Welt am Sonntag* 24 (13 June 1965): 18.

30 Diana Janas, "Stop all the Troops: Here's Mother Courage," *Seed. UCI Alumni Monthly* (November 1971): 31.

31 Gebert, op. cit.

32 Brigitte Deitert, "Für jedes Experiment zu haben: Gespräch mit Recklinghausens 'Mutter Courage,'" *Neue Ruhr Zeitung* Feuilleton, 29 May 1965, p. 18.

33 Gebert, op. cit.

34 For example, Albert Schulze-Vellinghausen, "Die Ruhrfestspiele im neuen Haus: Eröffnung mit Schillers 'Räubern' und Brechts 'Mutter Courage,'" *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 14 June 1965, p. 46.

35 Anne Rose Katz, "Mutter Courage kämpft und überlebt wie eine Hyäne: Buckwitz Inszenierung in Recklinghausen" in Lotte Lenya file at the Weill-Lenya Research Center. Wilhelm Unger, "'Mutter Courage' bei den Ruhrfestspielen: Lotte Lenya gibt keine Hyäne," *Kölner Stadtanzeiger* 137, 1965 (found as undated clipping).

36 Johannes Jacobi, "Abschied vom Recklinghauser Saalbau: Ruhrfestspiele im neuen Haus: 'Die Räuber' und 'Mutter Courage,'" *Die Zeit*, 1965 (copy in the Weill-Lenya Research Center).

37 "Lotte Lenyas Courage: Harry Buckwitz inszenierte den zweiten Abend der Ruhrfestspiele," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 15 June 1965, p. 7.

38 Dan Sullivan, "Lotte Lenya in Courage," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 Nov. 1971, p. 23.

39 Gebert, op. cit.

40 "Buckwitz hatte Courage mit 'Mutter Courage.' Lotte Lenya und die Überwindung der Langeweile in Recklinghausen," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 12 June 1965, p. 12.

41 Gertrude Dahlberg, "Pirate Jenny of New City," *Country Citizen*, 7 April 1965, p. 7.

42 The video recording of *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* is from the production of the play at the Ruhrfestspiele Recklinghausen in 1965 and was first aired on German television's "2. Programm" on 25 July, 1965.

43 Brecht's telegram can be found in the Weill-Lenya Research Center.

A New Addition to Weill's *Gesammelte Schriften*

by

David Kilroy

Recently located amongst the Maxwell Anderson papers at the University of Texas at Austin is a typescript copy of a previously-undocumented interview that Kurt Weill recorded with talk-show host Margaret Arlen and her announcer Harry Marble for broadcast on Saturday morning, 7 January 1950 over WCBS radio. The interview program - sponsored by Celanese and Vicks Steam - was of the morning talk-show genre, hence not very conducive to extended philosophizing. The first portion (segueing from Marble and Arlen's opening banter to more substantive issues) has little to offer our current knowledge about Weill's career. But pithy remarks in subsequent parts of the text significantly add to our collective understanding of the composer's later musico-dramatic thinking and thus form a valuable addition to the new *Gesammelte Schriften*. Weill's distinction between "American opera" and "musical play," his thoughts on the origins and future development of musical theater in the United States in light of competition from other entertainment media, his prediction of America's cultural hegemony in the second half of the twentieth century, and his brief explanation of his collaborative procedures with Anderson - all provide more detailed knowledge of his public attitudes and postures at the time when *Lost in the Stars* was successfully up and running at the Music Box Theater. This newly-recovered interview, which aired just ten weeks before the onset of Weill's fatal coronary attack, is the last of his public "writings" presently known.

COLUMBIA BROADCASTING SYSTEM

WCBS PRESENTS MARGARET ARLEN

GUEST: KURT WEILL

SATURDAY, JANUARY 7, 1950, 8:30 - 9:00 A.M. EST

CLIENTS: CELANESE, VICKS STEAM

TO BE RECORDED THURSDAY AT NOON

CUE: (COLUMBIA BROADCASTING SYSTEM)

MARBLE: Good Morning. It's 8:30 on this Saturday morning in the year 1950 - time by transcription for MARGARET ARLEN who's here every morning at this same time.

ARLEN: With Harry Marble making the introductions of course. Do you know? I found myself writing 1949 on checks yesterday?

MARBLE: Guess you had to tear them up.

ARLEN: No, you can change the '49 to '50 and just initial the change. I found that out - and it was a very useful bit of information.

MARBLE: Any other bits of useful information this morning?

ARLEN: I have a sage little saying you might like.

MARBLE: What's that?

ARLEN: There are just two kinds of women. The careless women lose their gloves. The careful women lose just one glove.

MARBLE: I'm sure that little saying will come in handy some day. I can quote it at Doris when she loses her next pair of gloves.

ARLEN: I hope that won't be soon.

MARBLE: I saw a very funny cartoon in a magazine the other day - I can't remember which one it is. A couple is coming out of the

movies and the husband says, "Did you remember to forget your gloves?"

ARLEN: Oh, how wonderful. I'll think that next time I remember to forget mine.

MARBLE: I wonder why it is women lose so many more gloves than men.

ARLEN: We wear them more - I'm sure that's why. And now that we've thoroughly discussed gloves, let's go on to something else - to our guest for today to be exact.

INTERVIEW

ARLEN: You've heard of Kurt Weill, the famous composer, I know. Kurt did the music for *Street Scene*, *Knickerbocker Holiday*, *Lost in the Stars* - in fact, many of the most beautiful plays that have been done on Broadway we owe in part to him. And it's a pleasure to have you with us again this morning.

MARBLE: But you know what I want to ask you right off, Kurt? I heard somewhere that you actually have a trout stream about twenty feet from your house.

WEILL: Yes, I have a trout stream in back of my house.

ARLEN: Do you actually catch any trout?

WEILL: I try to. Other people catch them.

MARBLE: Where is this house and trout stream of yours, Kurt?

WEILL: In New City in Rockland County. I have about a half a mile of property.

ARLEN: That's quite an artistic colony up there.

WEILL: I wouldn't call it that exactly. Maxwell Anderson lives there and Milton Caniff...

ARLEN: I ran into Bill Mauldin not long ago. He said he had just bought a house there.

WEILL: Yes, he's across the street from me.

MARBLE: That's quite a collection of talent.

WEILL: But artistic colony sounds so awful.

ARLEN: I think you're very lucky to live next door to Maxwell Anderson - maybe that geography is responsible for your collaboration.

WEILL: That wasn't entirely chance. I moved out there when we wrote *Knickerbocker Holiday*. Maxwell Anderson has several houses and he gave me one to live in. Well, I liked it so much I decided to stay. We've been living there ever since.

MARBLE: But with all your plays, you must spend a lot of time in New York City.

WEILL: I come in only once or twice a week normally, except when a play is in production. Then I'm in much more. And during rehearsals I live in town.

ARLEN: One of the good things about being a composer is that you can work just where you want - you don't have to go to an office every day.

WEILL: No, a musician can work practically everywhere.

MARBLE: You've done just that, too, haven't you, Kurt?

WEILL: I certainly have. I started off in Germany you know. I was born there, grew up there and studied there. I even had my first successes there.

ARLEN: When did you come over here, Kurt?

WEILL: In 1933 I moved to France, and in 1935 I came to the United States.

MARBLE: How do you like it?

WEILL: I love it. What a question! Seriously though, I not only like it but I can work very well here. I have lots of friends too. And I think the American theater has become - at least in my own field of the musical theater - the most important theater in the world.

ARLEN: The musical theater has come a long way hasn't it?

WEILL: Yes, in the last ten years the musical play has made enormous advances.

MARBLE: What was the first one you did?

WEILL: A play called *Johnny Johnson*. That was the first I did here and in a way the first that was put on in this country. Then after that came *Knickerbocker Holiday* and *Lady in the Dark*.

ARLEN: Two of my favorite plays of all time.

WEILL: I'm delighted to hear that. Then I went a step further in musical drama with *Street Scene* and another step with *Lost in the Stars*.

MARBLE: What's the difference between a musical play and an opera?

WEILL: In opera, music is everything. Music is the dominating element. Everything else is subordinate. In a musical play, the music is integrated into the play. It's more interwoven than in opera.

ARLEN: You wonder why it wasn't developed before.

WEILL: It always existed, but in this country musical comedy developed from the revue, which came out of the minstrel show.

MARBLE: But it seems like such a natural form.

WEILL: It is, but until this time the elements haven't been blended. Ever since I started in Germany, my main interest has been somewhere between musical comedy and the opera.

ARLEN: That's an enormous field.

WEILL: And until now it's been very neglected. When I came over here playwrights were very hesitant to work with music. They just wrote plays - that was all.

MARBLE: Somebody had to break the ice.

WEILL: That was done with Paul Green who wrote *Johnny Johnson* and Maxwell Anderson who did *Knickerbocker Holiday*.

ARLEN: Did they have to be talked into using music as part of their plays?

WEILL: I should say. At first they refused, but later they got very interested. They realized it was a form of theater that should be exploited. And today it's the most outstanding form in the theater, I think.

MARBLE: You don't have to talk playwrights into it anymore.

ARLEN: No, now no playwright is ashamed of a musical. Robert Sherwood has written one, Elmer Rice did *Street Scene* with me, Maxwell Anderson is using this form of course, so are Oscar Hammerstein and Moss Hart.

ARLEN: And they're all pretty outstanding theater people, I would say. Well, the theater has really changed a great deal in the first half of the century. I wonder what the next fifty years will bring.

WEILL: That's a difficult question.

MARBLE: Margaret's good at asking them.

WEILL: Well, I hope the next fifty years will bring a further development in this form of theater - something like an American opera. We've started that already with *Porgy and Bess*, *Street Scene* and *Regina*.

ARLEN: This will be distinctively American.

WEILL: Yes, I think this might develop into something very important and different from European opera. I have the feeling that America will be leading culturally much more than in the first half of the century.

MARBLE: Why do you think so?

WEILL: Not only do we have more money and power, but we have great talent here and audiences are getting more and more interested in better things all the time.

ARLEN: Is there a great difference between American and European audiences?

WEILL: Yes, American audiences are much more receptive to emotions in the theater. You can play on an American audience much more than a European audience. They can switch from laughing to crying in a moment. They're very emotional and therefore wonderful.

MARBLE: Isn't that funny. I would have thought it would have been just the other way around.

WEILL: No, that is my experience. I was amazed to find this out myself. Before I came here I thought Americans were cold and money conscious. Well, I found just the opposite. They're perfect audiences.

ARLEN: And - you said a moment ago - getting better all the time. Then what's all this talk about the theater dying?

WEILL: People have been saying that for about two thousand years. The theater is always dying - but never dies. And I'm sure it never will.

MARBLE: Why are you sure about that, Kurt?

WEILL: It's a very basic part of human expression of feelings. It's as basic as music, painting, or poetry. But there will always be ups and downs in the theater - there's no doubt about it.

ARLEN: I wonder whether it will change very much.

WEILL: It may take entirely different forms as there's more interest from more people. And there *will* be, because of radio, television, and films.

MARBLE: And you don't think any of these other mediums will do away with the legitimate theater?

WEILL: No, I think the theater with live actors will resist all onslaughts from technicalized mediums. You know, when radio started people said it meant the end of the theater.

MARBLE: It hasn't worked that way at all.

ARLEN: No, people still like to get dressed up and go out to the theater.

WEILL: Yes, and see live actors. The same predictions were made when talkies came in. Everyone said it was the end of the theater. Business was down for a few years, but then the theater came back.

MARBLE: Very luckily for you - although of course you could work in any other medium too.

WEILL: I could write music for the movies, radio, and television if the theater were dead - in fact I have done all this. But I keep coming back to the theater. It's more fascinating.

ARLEN: Can you explain that fascination to us a little bit?

WEILL: It's small, for one thing. It's not an industry. The rest are industries, and the creative artist has to adapt himself to the requirements of that industry. There's no use fighting it. There are enormous amounts of money involved and the industries want certain rules followed to protect those investments.

MARBLE: There's a lot of money invested in the theater, too, though.

WEILL: Nowhere near as much. Since the theater is smaller, the investments are smaller so one is much freer.

ARLEN: I guess that's true. Kurt, what are you working on now? *Lost in the Stars* is getting along very well and I suppose you're working away at something new.

WEILL: I haven't really started working yet. Maxwell Anderson and I have been discussing the possibility of a play based on the Mississippi books of Mark Twain - *Tom Sawyer*, *Huck Finn*, and *Life on the Mississippi*.

MARBLE: What a wonderful idea.

ARLEN: How do you start working out an idea like that?

WEILL: We talk about it and try to develop a story.

ARLEN: You don't come in on it later after the story is all done.

WEILL: Oh, no. I'm always in right at the beginning. I'm never lucky enough to find a libretto and set it to music.

MARBLE: After the story line is set, then what's the next step?

WEILL: Well, when you've developed the story with the playwright, it already contains the musical elements. Different people work different ways of course, but with Maxwell Anderson, he sits down and writes the scenes and the lyrics within the scenes.

ARLEN: Then you get what he's done.

WEILL: Yes, and I work on the music. I try to catch up with him from then on. We do a first draft, a second draft, and a third draft.

MARBLE: Wait, when does this stop?

WEILL: Not even then. When we go to work with the director, then we do a fourth draft. And when the actors come in, we change everything.

ARLEN: It's quite a process, isn't it?

WEILL: It's a long pull. It always takes a year. It's a year of very hard work and nothing else. But it's a lot of fun too.

MARBLE: When a show is on Broadway and off to a good start, do you just forget it?

WEILL: Oh, no. I go to see *Lost in the Stars* at least twice a week. I check on performances and if necessary I call a rehearsal or give notes to the cast.

ARLEN: That certainly takes care of those two days you spend in town every week. You sound like a very busy man.

WEILL: I am.

MARBLE: It's not like the old days when a composer sat in a garret composing and never stirred out of there.

WEILL: I don't believe those days ever existed. With symphonic composers, yes. But for theatrical composers, no. They always had to work with librettists and go to the theater. Mozart, Verdi, and Puccini certainly never could cut themselves off from life.

ARLEN: I guess not. Kurt Weill, we have one more question for you. We've asked several actors who have been our guests what was the most thrilling experience they ever had on the stage or in the audience. We'd like to ask you - as a composer - that same question.

WEILL: *AD LIB ANSWER*

ARLEN: Kurt Weill, we want to thank you again for being with us today. It's been a great pleasure to talk with you.

GRANT GUIDELINES

Types of Grants

The Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, Inc. is a non-profit corporation which promotes public understanding and appreciation of the musical works by Kurt Weill. To this end, the Foundation solicits proposals from individuals and non-profit organizations for funding of projects related to the perpetuation of Kurt Weill's artistic legacy. For the 1993 funding period, the Foundation is accepting proposals in one or more of the following categories:

- Research Grants
- Publication Assistance
- Dissertation Fellowships
- Travel Grants
- Professional Performance and Production Grants
- College and University Performance and Production Grants
- Recording Projects
- Broadcasts

Funding Period

To be eligible for funding, the project must be initiated during 1993 or the 1993-1994 academic year or cultural season.

Description of Categories

Research and Travel Grants. In this category funding may be requested to support specific research expenses. Applicants must be pursuing a topic directly related to Kurt Weill and/or Lotte Lenya and must submit a detailed outline of the proposed project. Travel grants should be requested to reimburse reasonable travel expenses to locations of primary source material.

Publication Assistance. Funding in this category may be requested to assist in expenses related to preparing manuscripts for publication in a recognized scholarly medium. Funds may be requested for, but not limited to, editing, indexing, design, and reproduction fees.

Dissertation Fellowships. Ph.D. candidates may apply for dissertation fellowships to assist in research activities. The application must include a copy of the dissertation proposal and two letters of recommendation, one of which is from the faculty advisor.

Professional and Regional Performance and Production Grants. Proposals from professional and regional opera companies, theater companies, and concert groups should demonstrate that requested funds will be used to improve the musical qualities of the performance. Examples of recommended requests include funds for soloists, orchestra fees, and extra rehearsals. There is no restriction on the amount requested.

College and University Performance and Production Grants:

Stage Works. The Foundation will award up to ten grants, maximum \$3,000 each, to colleges and universities in support of general production expenses for performances

of Kurt Weill's stage works. Awards will be based on the work to be performed, geographic distribution, and the musical excellence demonstrated by the application. All works must be presented in fully staged versions using Weill's original orchestrations. Productions of *The Threepenny Opera* are not eligible for funding. In general, performances of *Mahagonny Singspiel* receive low priority for funding.

Concert Works. Assistance for performances of concert works is available in grants of up to \$1,500 to cover expenses including but not limited to increased rehearsal time, guest artist fees, and promotion.

Recording Projects. Proposals requesting funds for artist and musician fees, rehearsal expenses, and mastertape production expenses will be eligible. Priority will be given to works which have not yet been recorded in their original form. Only projects with a commitment from a record company are eligible, and all financial arrangements with the recording company must be disclosed.

Broadcasts. The Foundation welcomes proposals from producers and non-profit broadcasters to support post-production costs for special programs which feature primarily Kurt Weill and his music. A complete summary of the project must be submitted along with evidence of commitment for broadcast.

Funding Priorities

For the current granting period, fully staged productions of *Der Zar lässt sich fotografieren* and *Der Protagonist* will be especially privileged in evaluation of funding priorities.

1. Research proposals should demonstrate the promise of publishable results.
2. Performance proposals that demonstrate musical excellence and authenticity are encouraged.
3. For stage productions, performances of complete works in their original versions receive priority. Newly compiled properties that simply use Weill's songs are not eligible for funding.
4. Proposals for local productions or performances should demonstrate a previous record of artistic excellence, evidence of community support, and a potential for influence beyond the immediate area.
5. Stock and amateur productions of *The Threepenny Opera* are not eligible for funding.
6. While performances of *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik* are normally not eligible for funding, programs of larger scope including *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik* as well as other Weill works may be funded.
7. Proposals for script translations and musical adaptations are not eligible for funding.

8. Proposals where the music serves an incidental or background function will not be considered. For example, proposals which feature the use of the music to support a new dramatic property, or function as background usage in films, video, etc. are not eligible for funding.

9. In general, the Foundation does not consider proposals for retroactive funding.

Evaluation Procedures

After applications have been reviewed by the Foundation's staff, additional supporting materials (including recordings, recommendations, and samples of previous work) may be requested for consideration by the Advisory Panel on Grant Evaluations, which will make recommendations to the Board of Trustees. The Advisory Panel on Grant Applications shall be composed of independent, prominent members from the musical, theatrical, and scholarly communities. Grants will be awarded on an objective and non-discriminatory basis. Grantee selection criteria will include:

1. Relevance and value of the project to the Foundation's purposes;
2. Quality of the project;
3. Evidence of the applicant's potential, motivation, and ability to carry out the project successfully;
4. Evidence of the applicant's prior record of achievement in the field covered by the project.

Applicants will be informed of awards by 1 February 1993.

Application Information

Applications for the 1993 awards must be received by 1 November 1992 and should contain the following information:

1. A detailed description of the project, along with the cover sheet provided.
2. An up-to-date curriculum vita or resume for individuals, or a profile of purposes, activities, and past achievements (including a list of references), for organizations.
3. A detailed and itemized budget showing entire project expenses and income, including income anticipated from other funding sources.
4. Performance Grant Fact Sheet (if applying for a performance grant).
5. Research proposals must specify other grants applied for and the date of determination for each. Applicants must notify the Foundation if other grants are awarded.

All applications and correspondence should be addressed to:

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Director of Programs
Kurt Weill Foundation for Music
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