

Kurt Weill

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Kurt Weill

Newsletter

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A variety of opinions are expressed in the Newsletter; they do not necessarily represent the publisher's official viewpoint. Letters to the editor are welcome.

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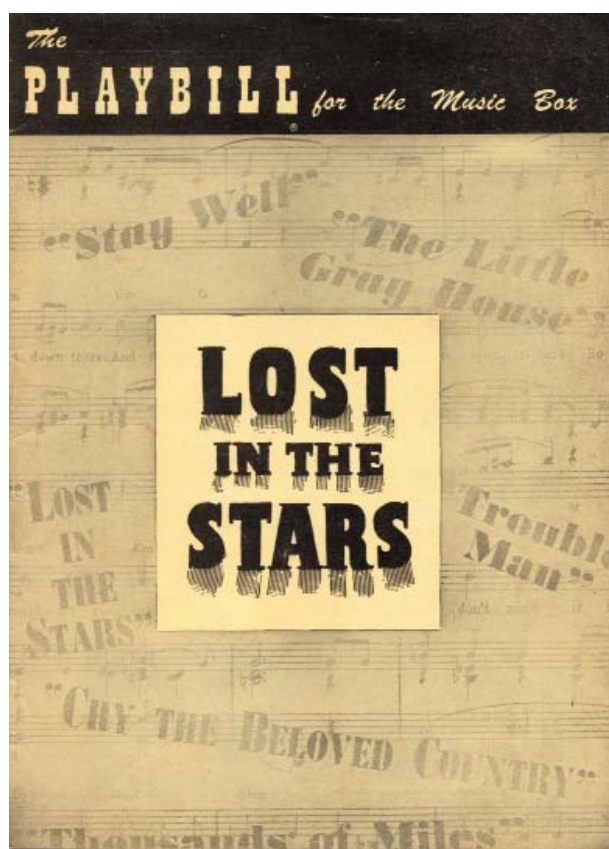
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Cover photo: Weill and Maxwell Anderson taking a break from *Lost in the Stars* rehearsals (1949).
Photo: Hugelmeyer



Note from the Editor

Mark your calendars: On 25–26 January and 3–6 February 2011 in New York City you will have a chance to hear the two stage works that Weill created with Maxwell Anderson, *Knickerbocker Holiday* and *Lost in the Stars*. The former is a “musical comedy” from 1938 that introduced the famous “September Song,” the latter a “musical tragedy” from 1949 that turned the very notion of musical comedy on its head. The proximity of these two upcoming events—both imaginatively conceived, semi-staged productions by prestigious New York organizations—seems like a rare alignment of the stars that has attracted stellar performers and creative teams (for detailed information see “Topical Weill,” p. 1a). This prospect is more than enough reason to train the spotlight of this issue of the *Newsletter* on the collaboration of Weill and Anderson, which greatly enriched the legacy of the American musical theater and beyond.

A newly acquired trove of Lenya correspondence represents an important addition to the Weill-Lenya Research Center. Excerpts from these colorful letters can be found on pp. 11–12. The review section contains a report about a performance of Weill’s first stage work, the children’s pantomime *Zaubernacht*, not seen and heard in its original form since 1925. Many more reviews round out the issue, most notably a report on a much heralded production of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* in Madrid, which will be released on DVD.

Elmar Juchem

Original playbill covers from the Weill-Anderson collaborations *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938) and *Lost in the Stars* (1949).

Musical Alchemists

Weill and Anderson as Collaborators

by Elmar Juchem

The Baptist minister's son spoke at a memorial for the Jewish cantor's son: "How great Kurt Weill was as a composer of music the world will slowly discover—for he was a much greater musician than anyone now imagines. It takes decades and scores of years and centuries to sift these things out, but it's done in time—and Kurt Weill will emerge as one of the very few who wrote great music." Maxwell Anderson, the eulogist, took comfort in saying these words. He was looking back at a friendship of fourteen years, a time during which he and Weill had spent countless hours together, discussing plays, books, music, radio, film, and early television, the state of the theater, and often the state of the world. Given the intensity and longevity of their association, their collaborative output seems almost meager. They completed just two shows for Broadway and were in the midst of writing another when Weill died.

Unlike Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller, Anderson is hardly a household name today, yet he is the missing link between the two. Woody Allen did his homework for *Bullets over Broadway* (1995), where a blasé actress who had seen better days (played by Dianne Wiest) repeatedly stated something to the effect that she would consider scripts only by Eugene O'Neill or Maxwell Anderson. Indeed, Anderson (1888–1959) was the most prolific and feted American playwright in the 1930s and 40s, a period during which twenty of his plays appeared on Broadway (that's one a year), featuring such actors as Helen Hayes, Katharine Cornell, Ingrid Bergman, Burgess Meredith, and Rex Harrison. The plays won a Pulitzer Prize and Drama Critics' Circle Awards, and about half of them were adapted for the silver screen, where luminaries such as Errol Flynn, Bette Davis, Katharine Hepburn, Edward G. Robinson, or Humphrey Bogart took over.

The precise date of the first encounter between composer and playwright is unknown. Lotte Lenya recalled much later

that publicist Helen Deutsch introduced Weill and Anderson at a party given in connection with Anderson's celebrated play *Winterset*, which had opened in September 1935 (two weeks after Weill and Lenya had arrived from Europe). Deutsch acted as press representative for *Winterset* and press agent for the Group Theatre, which made her a well-positioned matchmaker as Weill had begun to work with the Group by January 1936. Nobody knows what the composer and the playwright talked about during their first encounter, but a likely topic may have been Anderson's *What Price Glory* (1924), the film version of which Weill had seen in 1927 in Berlin and praised in a letter to Lenya as "exhilarating because of its pacifist stance and its artistic realization." In 1929 Carl Zuckmayer's German-language adaptation of the hit play was in need of incidental music. Erwin Piscator headed the production team, which included several familiar faces from Weill's Berlin orbit, among them Caspar Neher, Ernst Busch, and Maria Bard. Piscator had succeeded a year earlier in securing Weill's services for incidental music (for Leo Lania's play *Konjunktur*), but this time it was Walter Goehr who would provide the incidental music (oddly enough—or not—Goehr had conducted incidental music by Weill for a production of Strindberg's *Gustav III* in 1927). Anderson, in turn, could have seen Weill's *Threepenny Opera*, either the ill-fated 1933 run on Broadway—with Burgess Meredith in the cast—or the film version that had opened in New York's Warner Theater in May 1931. At least some of the music must have been familiar, as Anderson's oldest son, Quentin, professed to owning a record with Weill's music, playing it rather too frequently for the taste of his mother (she died in 1931).

An opportunity to intensify the contact came in June 1936, when Deutsch drove Weill and Lenya to Anderson's house in the country. Anderson and his second wife, Mab, lived in New City, N.Y., a hamlet with

a small artists' enclave west of the Hudson, about thirty miles north of Manhattan. That summer Anderson was busy getting not one but three plays ready for Broadway (*The Wingless Victory*, *High Tor*, and *The Masque of Kings*), yet there was much talk and enthusiasm about a possible collaboration. Lenya sang two of Weill's songs for the playwright.

The composer, of course, already boasted an impressive record of luring esteemed playwrights into the world of musical theater. Having long criticized the thematically pointless, dramaturgically bewildering librettos of operas composed in the wake of Richard Wagner, and showing little interest in escapist operetta, Weill had the vision of collaborating with first-rate dramatists rather than second-rate librettists, and he preferred poets over tried-and-true lyricists. Both Georg Kaiser and Bert Brecht, Germany's foremost playwrights in the 1920s, had been novices in the musical theater when Weill approached them. One can easily imagine that Weill used these first encounters with Anderson to hint at the broad range of possibilities for music in the theater.

And Weill didn't give up easily. When he saw Anderson's *The Star-Wagon* in October 1937, he sent the playwright a note praising his handling of reality and fantasy, "so that we don't know any more, where the one starts and the other ends." The same kind of mélange had played a crucial role in an earlier work of Weill's, *Der Silbersee* (1933), written in collaboration with Kaiser. Given the good notices the work had received from the few still independent papers, it is not surprising that Weill considered it a candidate for an American adaptation, as small penciled notes attest; scribbled next to *Der Silbersee* was the name of a possible adaptor: "Maxwell Anderson."

Neither a musical version of *The Star-Wagon* nor an adaptation of *Der Silbersee* ever came to fruition, but in the spring of 1938 an idea finally clicked. When Weill

spent a weekend in the country, Anderson proposed the idea of adapting Washington Irving's satirical *History of New York*—with the clunky subtitle *From the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty*—as a musical comedy. Published in 1809 under the pen name Diedrich Knickerbocker, Irving's book focused on the last three Dutch governors of New Amsterdam and ridiculed the politics of Thomas Jefferson in the figure of William Kieft. Anderson, on the other hand, wanted to use the figure of Peter Stuyvesant to target recent developments of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. Although Anderson had welcomed the election of FDR in 1932, he had grown weary of the long line of government interventions and was alarmed by the "packing" of the Court, FDR's attempt to reorganize the Supreme Court shortly after the beginning of his second term in 1937. For Anderson, it was a matter of principle. He saw the expansion of presidential powers as a potential threat to democracy and to individual freedom—the negative examples were clearly visible in Europe, where Mussolini and Hitler ruled their countries with an iron fist. Weill surely understood the espousal of these Thoreauvian views, but, having barely slipped out of Nazi Germany, it is clear that he saw Roosevelt in a far more positive light and thus tried to steer their project more toward a warning against totalitarianism in general. With the political points left to be fine-tuned, during that weekend in the country Weill and Anderson seem to have agreed on a principal constellation for their story, with Stuyvesant as a villainous colonial governor, Mynheer Tienhoven as a corrupt capitalist and city councillor, and a young rebel hero named Brom Broeck who cannot take orders, which made him the first true American. Thrown into this triangle was the role of Tina Tienhoven, the councilman's daughter who loves Brom but is promised to the older Stuyvesant.

In mid-April 1938 Weill headed out to Hollywood, where he had to complete work on Fritz Lang's *You and Me*. Around the same time, Anderson had his hands full with a bold new venture. He and four other top playwrights—S. N. Behrman, Sidney Howard, Elmer Rice, and Robert Sherwood—had grown dissatisfied with the producing organizations on Broadway, including the Theatre Guild, and thus announced in March 1938 that they would form their own producing entity, called The Playwrights' Company. This was a stunning move at the time, in that a group not of young rebel artists but of five established dramatists

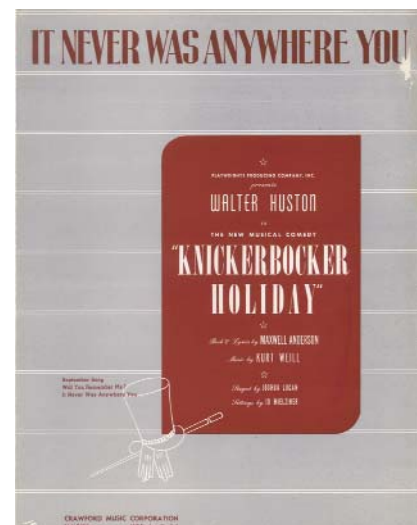
sought to gain more artistic freedom by severing ties with their longtime producers. Anderson's first work to reach Broadway under the auspices of the Playwrights' Company turned out to be his collaboration with Weill: *Knickerbocker Holiday*.

When Weill returned to the East Coast at the end of May, he was somewhat surprised to find a completed draft libretto. Ever since his first opera, *Der Protagonist* (1924/25), he had made a point of collaborating early in the process with his librettists or book writers, so musical considerations could guide and shape the work. It was a delicate process, of course, as the famous writers would not easily accept a *de facto* co-playwright at their side, and Weill had to use all his considerable diplomatic skill to get his points across. With the exceptions of Franz Werfel and Jacques Deval, who proved nearly deaf to Weill's suggestions, the playwrights usually learned to appreciate the composer's contributions (it probably helped that Weill never demanded credit as coauthor of the text). Even Brecht admitted in a personal note scribbled into his daily log in 1943, "er besitzt ein gutes dramaturgisches Urteil" (he has good dramaturgical judgment). Yet, defying musical comedy's traditional division of labor by writing out dialogue and lyrics in one stretch, Anderson had worked swiftly in Weill's absence. Since the composer was not around to advise, the playwright appears to have used Gilbert & Sullivan's *The Mikado* as a guide for placement of musical numbers. But he waited to submit the script to his fellow playwright-producers until his collaborator could weigh in. Weill sublet his apartment in Manhattan and rented a little house about five miles from Anderson's, so that the two could discuss matters daily and in person. Contrary to the playwright's reputation of "refusing to change even a comma of his work"—at least according to the Theatre Guild's Lawrence Langner—Anderson was quite happy to accept the composer's suggestions for revision. The most "Gilbertian" numbers were dropped, and several new numbers written and embedded, among them the romantic duet "It Never Was You" (sung famously by Judy Garland in her final film) and the mildly absurd "Will You Remember Me?" which mocked the traditional operetta love duet with such lines as "Oh, love, will you keep me in mind? . . . When the worms on my corse have dined."

When Joshua Logan, fresh from his success with Rodgers and Hart's *I Married an Angel*, came aboard as director, more changes were made. It may have been Logan



Maxwell Anderson in 1935.



First edition of the sheet music.



Weill in 1937 during his first visit to Hollywood.

who advised Weill and Anderson to include a few musical numbers in popular song form. One such addition was a custom-tailored composition for the show's star, Walter Huston (the father of John Huston and grandfather of Angelica), who had been cast for the part of Stuyvesant. Before composing a song for the famous actor, Weill wanted to know his singing range. Huston cabled back from California, "No range whatsoever," but added that he would soon appear on Bing Crosby's weekly radio show and sing something. Weill and Anderson listened to the radio and went to work. Anderson crafted a lyric for a love song that avoids the word "love" altogether, and he revised the text's structure when it was clear that his first draft did not conform to the conventions of the popular song form. For his musical setting, Weill decided to reuse the opening measures of an arietta he had composed for *Der Kuhhandel* in 1934. The song blurs its tonal center while oscillating between major and minor mode. Few people would have predicted that "September Song" would become Weill's biggest hit during his lifetime (he did not live to see "Moritat" turn into "Mack the Knife").

Meanwhile, the show's political aspects had become somewhat complicated, because

Anderson's intended critique of overzealous New Dealers grew more incompatible with the worsening conditions in Europe. Weill seems to have sensitized Anderson to the situation in Germany, as some line changes suggest. For instance, in Stuyvesant's first number, "One Touch of Alchemy," partly repeated in the Act I finale "All Hail the Political Honeymoon," the refrain:

*Then hail the political honeymoon
And the honeymoon of time,
To each individual man his boon
In a plenitude sublime!*

became

*Then hail the political honeymoon
Sing the news to hoi polloi,
Of each individual man his boon
In an age of strength through joy!*

The proclamation of an "age of strength through joy" was a reference to the Nazi organization *Kraft durch Freude* (KdF), which was familiar to American audiences through news coverage of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. Anderson had to fight to keep at least a few pointed references to the "Second Term" sins, because his play-

wright colleagues were all Roosevelt supporters to some degree, with Robert Sherwood moonlighting as a speech writer for FDR in Washington and Elmer Rice a committed leftist. Huston had been a personal friend of FDR's for some time.

On 24 September the show had a single tryout performance in hurricane-flooded Hartford and then went on to Boston. Given the many changes on the road, the Playwrights added another set of tryouts in Washington, D.C. On the last night there an unexpected visitor showed up: Franklin D. Roosevelt himself. The event received extensive news coverage, because the President had attended the theater only twice during his presidency (Rachel Crothers's *When Ladies Meet* in 1933 and Sidney Howard's *Dodsworth*, with Walter Huston, in 1935). Roosevelt appears to have thoroughly enjoyed the performance, taking it all in with good humor. Anderson, on the other hand, could not stomach the idea of accepting the President's invitation to the White House after the performance, and Weill did not attend either, possibly out of solidarity with his new friend.

The opening of *Knickerbocker Holiday* on 19 October 1938 at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre had been greatly anticipated, as



Rehearsing in 1938: Weill at the piano, with Walter Huston, Jeanne Madden, and Maxwell Anderson.

people were curious to see how Anderson could possibly write a musical comedy and how Walter Huston would sing and dance on a peg leg. Observers noted the oddity that Weill had created his own orchestrations and that a former conductor of the Metropolitan Opera, Maurice Abravanel, was to lead the orchestra. Critics lauded the work in general, praised Anderson's eloquent lyrics, and noted the exceptional quality and variety of Weill's music. But several critics were miffed by Anderson's analogies between fascism and the New Deal. Perhaps the play's explicit references to elements of both Roosevelt's and Hitler's politics undercut the general message about the dangers of governmental power. In particular, the reviewer for the communist-affiliated *New Masses* was riled by her experience in the theater (but turned out to have a feel for picking a hit song):

I think calling the New Deal fascist is a poor sort of joke, and I consider labeling Roosevelt the American Hitler a vicious perversion. Mr. Anderson is too clever to damn the New Deal by calling it Red. Instead he has his Peter Stuyvesant paraphrase Roosevelt, even to the "my friends"—and then call in Storm Troopers. *Knickerbocker Holiday* is no crude, slambang attack on progressive America. Mr. Anderson makes his points by indirection. His lyrics are suave. His jokes are disarming up to the stinger on the end. . . . It seems a shame to have to add to this review the words, "With Music by Kurt Weill." And Mr. Weill's score for *Knickerbocker Holiday* is delightful. Many of the songs are hauntingly beautiful, and one at least, "September Song," will surely become a classic. Mr. Weill shows a new power in *Knickerbocker Holiday*, and a new variety of expression. I think it is nothing short of a catastrophe that this Kurt Weill music should illuminate Mr. Anderson's book.

Anderson tried to clarify his point of view by publishing a "Brief Preface to the Politics of 'Knickerbocker Holiday'" in the *New York Times*. But the bickering about the play's politics ended three weeks after the opening, when the Nazis staged the anti-Semitic pogroms infamously known as "Kristallnacht." The Playwrights' Company acted immediately and announced a benefit performance of *Knickerbocker Holiday* for German refugees, where Anderson gave a curtain speech on 20 November: "It's a little embarrassing to interrupt a lighthearted travesty of dictatorship with a reference to a real dictatorship which is no joke to any of us. There is no one here tonight who is not

aware that a calamity of staggering proportions has befallen the peoples of Europe." Anderson concluded his speech by saying that democracies may have to prepare to defend themselves, even if it meant a temporary infringement of individual liberties.

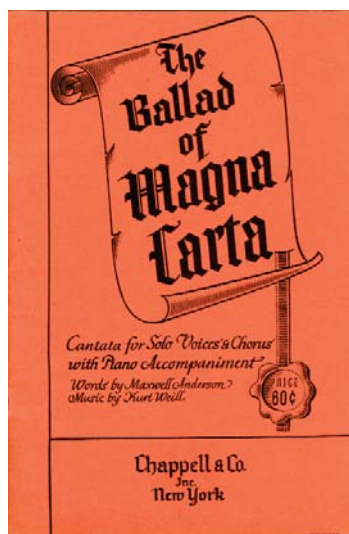
Weill's voice was conspicuously absent in the media during the creation and the run of *Knickerbocker Holiday*, given that interviews with him had appeared in conjunction with *Johnny Johnson* (1936) and *The Eternal Road* (1937). Perhaps he was happy to grant his more famous collaborator the lion's share of the limelight, or perhaps he was preoccupied by the events in Germany (his immediate family had left by July 1938, but many friends and former colleagues hadn't). It was clear, though, that Anderson and Weill were quite pleased with the outcome of their project. Anderson loved his new outlet for poetry—he later confessed "all I enjoy about a musical is the lyrics"—and the two artists seem to have shared a similar, somewhat Schilleresque view about the theater in general. In his preface to the printed libretto, Anderson handed Weill a huge compliment: "*Knickerbocker Holiday* was obviously written to make an occasion for Kurt Weill's music and . . . Mr. Weill responded by writing the best score in the history of our theatre." Weill replied privately, presenting his autograph draft score to "Mab and Max as a token of my undying affection."

While their first collaboration was still playing on Broadway (it ran until 11 March 1939 and then went out on a nine-week tour), Anderson and Weill initiated a new project in January during a vacation in southern Florida, where they were accompanied by their wives. The project they developed in the course of that year would never reach the stage, but four musical numbers surfaced a decade later in *Lost in the Stars*, including the song that would give that show its title. Anderson had described the new project's premise as "essentially the story of a man in a chaotic world in search of his own manhood and his rules of conduct." Anderson and Weill wanted to flesh out an epistolary novelette by the southern writer Harry Stillwell Edwards, *Eneas Africanus* (1919), for the great bass-baritone/actor/activist Paul Robeson. When he declined the title role of an ex-slave (Anderson had made the mistake of enclosing the novelette, which reeked of an "Uncle Tom" tone), the authors approached Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, who initially expressed lively interest in the project. Thus Weill and Anderson custom-tailored their musical to Robinson's famous dancing skills. This time they worked

September Song 30 selected recordings

Contrary to many accounts, "September Song" was not an instant hit, even though audiences requested encores from Walter Huston in the theater, and Anderson wrote a third strophe for this purpose. Four recordings appeared during the show's run, but they achieved only a modest measure of popularity. When the film version (1944), starring Charles Coburn and Nelson Eddy, played in theaters, Bing Crosby and Artie Shaw recorded "September Song," but their discs did not become best sellers either. Only in 1946 did the song achieve hit status. A second surge of recordings was set off by the film *September Affair* (1950), which made effective use of the song.

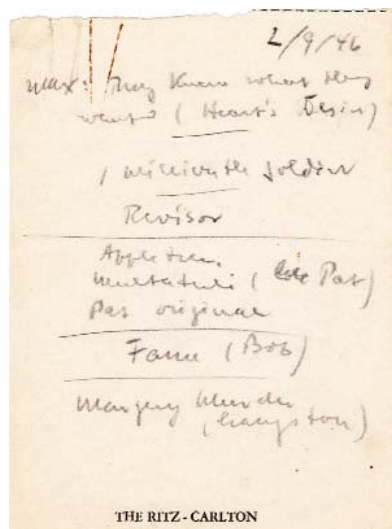
Walter Huston (1938)
 Bing Crosby (1944)
 Artie Shaw (1945)
 Phil Moore Four (1946)
 Dardanelle Trio (1946)
 Frank Sinatra (1946)
 Don Byas Quartet (1946)
 Teddy Wilson w/Sarah Vaughan (1946)
 Jo Stafford (1946)
 Django Reinhardt (1947)
 Harry James (1947)
 Erroll Garner (1949)
 Sidney Bechet's Circle Seven (1949)
 Red Norvo Trio (1950)
 Dave Brubeck Trio (1950)
 Stan Kenton (1951)
 Art Tatum (1953)
 Liberace (1953)
 Chet Baker (1958)
 Ella Fitzgerald (1960)
 Jimmy Durante (1963)
 Benny Goodman Quartet (1963)
 James Brown (1969)
 Dizzy Gillespie (1974)
 Willie Nelson (1978)
 Lou Reed (1985)
 A. Réaux, NY Phil. w/K. Masur (1993)
 Elaine Paige (1996)
 Bryan Ferry (1999)
 Dee Dee Bridgewater (2002)



Piano score published in August 1940.



Weill and Anderson at the watchtower on High Tor.



One of Weill's many project memos, listing ideas for "Max" at the top.

together from the start. Weill joined Anderson for ten weeks on the West Coast, where the playwright tended to his film work. Initial reports about the script, entitled *Ulysses Africanus*, and the music were enthusiastic, so the Playwrights' Company hoped to open a production on Broadway in the fall. In mid-August Weill rushed back to New York for the casting, Joshua Logan was eager to direct again, but Robinson was not immediately available as his current engagement in a tour added week after week of performances; worse yet, the heirs of the rights to the Edwards story demanded a share of royalties that all but doomed the project. Then tragedy struck as the company's Sidney Howard was killed in an accident on 23 August, and with the outbreak of war in Europe a week later the atmosphere in New York changed. The project had to be shelved indefinitely.

The beginning of World War II prompted a radio series on CBS, where broadcasting maverick Norman Corwin was commissioned to create a series called *The Pursuit of Happiness*. It was supposed to celebrate "with thankfulness and humility" that Americans still enjoyed their "constitutional right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (which the show's host, Burgess Meredith, paraphrased as "that third inalienable right: the right to chase rainbows"). The series' most famous program featured Earl Robinson and John LaTouche's *Ballad for Americans*, sung by Paul Robeson in November 1939. Anderson and Weill were commissioned to compose a short cantata to be aired in early February 1940. Choosing again a historical subject, Anderson made sure that he had an unmistakable villain at hand this time (unlike Stuyvesant played by the very likeable Walter Huston): Thanks to A. A. Milne every child knew that King John was not a good man, and so Anderson chose the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215 to praise one of the roots of the American liberties. Yet he and Weill made some clear allusions to the present situation, as their cantata mentioned the King's atrocities against Jews and called "resistance unto tyrants" a universal and timely duty. Having composed the radio cantata *Der Lindberghflug* on a text by Brecht in 1929, Weill brought some experience to the table. Anderson's first draft narrated the events at Runnymede in a somewhat whimsical ballad of eight strophes, but revisions introduced some dialogue between the historical characters, so the whole affair became livelier. Weill set the words for a singing narrator (performed by Meredith),

bass, baritone, a large mixed chorus, and orchestra. A surviving archival recording shows that the broadcast of the fourteen-minute cantata used special sound effects (galloping hooves, etc.) to heighten the dramatic impact.

Anderson and Weill then seem to have gone their separate ways, yet the opposite was the case. When the spectacular success of *Lady in the Dark* (1941) earned Weill and Lenya enough money to buy a house, they decided to become neighbors of the Andersons in New City, where an old farmhouse was available on South Mountain Road. The path between the two houses became well worn over the years, evenings were often spent discussing each other's projects, the wives frequently joined to offer their expertise as actors, and there was much socializing and cardplaying. After the United States was drawn into the war in December 1941, Weill and Anderson collaborated on a few small projects for the war effort, including an episode for the radio series "This Is War" (also produced by Norman Corwin) in February 1942 and a few propaganda songs for use in unspecified rallies and events. As neighbors in New City, they all became members of the U.S. Army's Aircraft Warning Service, taking their turns watching for enemy aircraft at a tower on High Tor, the mountain north of the road that Anderson had made famous with his play.

The projects discussed during the 1940s offer a fascinating glimpse into the range of their thinking. In 1941 they considered adapting Eugene O'Neill's *The Fountain*, in 1945 Anderson was Weill's first choice as lyricist for *Street Scene* and a serious candidate for adapting *Die Dreigroschenoper*. That same year they drafted an outline of an original musical for director George Cukor based on an episode of Joseph Jefferson's career (the famed nineteenth-century actor best known for his portrayal of Rip van Winkle), and a year later they worked out a solid scheme to adapt Sidney Howard's *They Knew What They Wanted* (which Frank Loesser would turn into *The Most Happy Fella* ten years later). They also planned to create musical versions of Anderson's *High Tor* (so did Stephen Sondheim, who unsuccessfully approached Anderson in 1951) and *The Wingless Victory*, the latter as an opera featuring the star baritone Lawrence Tibbett, with whom they signed a preliminary agreement in May 1949. One of the last unrealized projects they discussed was an adaptation of *Moby Dick* for the Metropolitan Opera.

By attending each other's tryouts, Weill and Anderson acted as uncredited show doctors, and on these occasions the composer established even closer contacts with the other members of the Playwrights' Company. When S. N. Behrman left the organization in June 1946, the remaining three playwrights asked Weill to become an official member, a sure sign of their high esteem for the composer's judgment in all matters dramatic.

Anderson's *Truckline Cafe* (1946), which gave Marlon Brando his first big role on Broadway, looked like an opportunity to revive two songs from *Ulysses Africanus* as incidental music, but the numbers were cut before the play opened in New York. The previous year, Anderson and Weill had considered other songs from *Ulysses* for their adaptation of *Street Scene* ("Lost in the Stars," for example, was supposed to conclude Act I, sung by Henry, the janitor). The ultimate destination for "Lost in the Stars" came along in December 1947, when Anderson returned from a trip to Europe and encountered Oscar Hammerstein II and his wife aboard the ship. Dorothy Hammerstein told Anderson about a novel, soon to be published, by the South African author Alan Paton. *Cry, the Beloved Country* (Scribner's, 1948) made an eloquent indictment of the recently established apartheid regime by telling the odyssey of a black pastor, Stephen Kumalo, whose son, Absalom, had murdered a white man's son who happened to be a supporter of the black cause. Pledging to do no more evil, Absalom confesses and is sentenced to death. Anderson and Weill then tweaked the ending a bit: At the hour of his execution, Stephen and Jarvis, the white man, meet and begin an awkward friendship. Although the plot is set in South Africa, the authors made it clear that they had finally found a subject that allowed them to comment on hypocritical segregation policies at home. In spring 1948 they secured the rights and completed an outline for their adaptation before resuming projects already begun (Anderson's *Anne of the Thousand Days* and Weill/Alan Lerner's *Love Life*).

Turning Paton's relentless tragedy into a work for Broadway was a daring endeavor. Weill and Anderson decided early on to transmute the novel's descriptive passages into choral ones and to use the chorus in Greek fashion, much as Weill had done in his opera *Die Bürgschaft* (1932) and also in *Der Silbersee*. When Anderson finished a first draft of the script in mid-February 1949, he subtitled it "A Choral Play in Two

Acts." Given the substantial role of the chorus, Weill decided to score the work for a chamber ensemble of twelve players: five lower strings (i.e., no violins), three woodwinds, a trumpet, piano (also accordion), harp, and percussion. Todd Duncan, who had sung Porgy in the original 1935 production of the Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess*, was cast in the role of Stephen Kumalo. Acting on a suggestion by director Rouben Mamoulian (who had staged the 1935 *Porgy*), Weill and Anderson created more material for the great baritone, the song "Thousands of Miles" and the aria "O Tixo, Tixo, Help Me!" so the show eventually became less choral and more dramatic.

Billed as "a musical tragedy," the production opened on 30 October 1949. Its emotional power caught many theatergoers by surprise. One woman stated that "she was made so happily unhappy by *Lost in the Stars* that she felt like dropping in at *Death of a Salesman* just to cheer herself up." Alan Paton, who had arrived from South Africa in time for the premiere, reported that the audience "wept and shouted and clapped." Reviews were quite favorable, although not ecstatic; some papers felt compelled to send both their drama and music critics—a telling sign of Weill's stature and multifaceted style. In the following days newsworthy lines began to form in front of the box office, and it appears that word-of-mouth in particular boosted ticket sales.

This was surprising as many of the show's elements proved to be rather intellectual. The existentialist theme of "Lost in the Stars" is thought-provoking at the very least (the motif of abandonment by God had appeared already in Anderson's poem "Full Circle," published in 1920 in the *New Republic*, and he elaborated on the topic in 1937 in his essay *Whatever Hope We Have*). Similarly, Anderson's probing of the notion of justice in the opening chorus of Act II, "The Wild Justice," picked up on an earlier fragmentary poem that probably dates from around 1937. The choral number "A Bird of Passage" offered a variation of the medieval sparrow-in-the-hall metaphor, and Weill and Anderson contemplated using it as part of a loosely planned "Service for those who die without faith except in men."

But Weill had made all of this both accessible and palatable through his gorgeous settings. *Lost in the Stars* displays an astonishing musical variety, but there are no jarring clashes of idioms. If the four numbers in popular song form seem simplistic in comparison to some of the choral writing or Stephen's *preghiera*, they are each properly

contextualized: Stephen sings "The Little Gray House" and "Lost in the Stars" to his little nephew Alex; Irina, Absalom's girlfriend, naively sings "Stay Well" when it is clear that he cannot be well; and Stephen's optimistic and innocent opening number, "Thousands of Miles," soon turns out to have been naive as well. (For additional information about *Lost in the Stars*, including many reviews from 1949, see this *Newsletter*, Spring 2008.)

Six days after the opening, Weill strolled over to Anderson's house and proposed an adaptation of *Huckleberry Finn* as a musical. Anderson was genuinely intrigued by the idea and sat down that very night to refresh his memory of the novel. In the following days he revisited also Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. From mid-November through January they worked intently on a story line, proposing and rejecting many ideas and struggling with the ending. Mamoulian had already agreed to direct. Anderson began the actual writing on 25 January 1950 and handed each completed lyric over to his collaborator. Weill drafted his first number, "Come in, Mornin'," on 13 February. The second one, "River Chanty" (also the proposed title for the entire project), followed two days later—it would have been the show's grand opening number. Things got delayed when they attended the tryout of Joshua Logan's *The Wisteria Trees* in Boston. In March Weill suffered from a serious case of psoriasis that forced him to bed. On 16 March he composed the "Catfish Song," but coronary pain in the following days and a major heart attack on 19 March incapacitated him. He was rushed to a hospital in Manhattan. A week later, he began feeling slightly better and Anderson brought him more lyrics, which Weill started to draft while lying in bed; he also proofread pages for the publication of the piano-vocal score of *Lost in the Stars*. The last song he put on paper was called "This Time Next Year." On 2 April Weill asked Anderson to bring the completed libretto to the hospital, but he did not live to see it: the next day he suffered a second heart attack, this one fatal.

Weill's death was a shock to everybody near him. Anderson wrote in his daily log, usually reserved for professional matters: "Kurt—of all men!" He spoke a few words at Weill's funeral and it was probably his idea to engrave a stanza (music and text) of "A Bird of Passage" on his friend's tombstone. Over the next fifteen months, Anderson felt obliged to finish the incomplete project. About fifteen composers

would approach him with offers to “finish” the musical; he himself explored the notion with Burton Lane, Harry Warren, Arthur Schwartz, Tom Scott, Irving Berlin, Frank Loesser, Richard Rodgers, Ralph Blane, Victor Young, and Aaron Copland. In the end, however, none of them could replace his friend and collaborator.

For further reading:

Anderson, Hesper. *South Mountain Road: A Daughter's Journey of Discovery* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

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Juchem, Elmar. *Kurt Weill und Maxwell Anderson: Neue Wege zu einem amerikanischen Musiktheater* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2000).

Wharton, John F. *Life among the Playwrights: Being Mostly the Story of the Playwrights Producing Company* (New York: Quadrangle, 1974).



Discussing a project: Anderson over at Lenya and Weill's house, late 1940s.

Two Letters from Weill to Anderson:

June 22, 1947

Dear Max and Mab,

Judging from your letter, you really seem to have the Hollywood blues and I wished you could pack up and come home. The Road is absolutely lovely this year (or it seems so to me after 6 weeks absence)—but it isn't quite real without you around. I got mad when I heard that your contracts aren't signed yet. That's the worst case of Hollywood trickery I've ever heard . . .

The flight from London to New York was lovely (7 hours across the Atlantic), and coming home to this country had some of the same emotion as arriving here 12 years ago. With all its faults (and partly because of them), this is still the most decent place to live in, and strangely enough, wherever I found decency and humanity in the world it reminded me of America, because, to me, Americanism is (or ought to be) the most advanced attempt to fill the gap between the individual and the technical progress. Countries like France and Italy seem too far removed from this form of Americanism, which England, at the moment, seems to get a little ahead of us—and I have a suspicion that Russia could become, in this sense, “Americanized”—if we want it. . . .

“Joan” is the big thing in all summer theatres. I saw Aufrecht's friend in Paris who made a very excellent adaptation and seems pretty sure that Edwige Feuillère (who is a great actress!) will play it. — We walked over to your place. Everything looks lovely, including the new “cabin” (some cabin!!). Now it is raining—perfect weather for you. So: come back. We miss you all.

Love — Kurt

July 25, 1947

Dear Max,

. . . I am quite impressed with Bob's [Sherwood] play which to me, even in its present, rather unfinished form, is way above anything he has done in years. . . .

As to our plans: I felt in your last letter that your ideas for the space-ship story [it would have included the song “Lost in the Stars”—ed.] are moving very definitely in the direction of a play rather than a musical, and, of course, as you say, you have no control over your imagination and have to follow where it leads you. I just know that some day we will hit again on an idea that cannot be done any other way except as a musical, and we will know it when we find it. I hope very much that this will happen because you are my favorite lyric writer, and it is such a shame to have this wonderful talent of yours wasted. I will make myself available for this event if and whenever it will happen—and we will have lots of fun.

The two show projects that have been suggested to me lately are still very vague. The one, I wrote you, might be something for us to work on (it has a wonderful part for Walter [Huston]), but I won't bother you with it now, especially since the movie rights are not cleared. The other is an interesting idea which Lerner brought to me last week and which we are investigating now. Well, we'll talk about it all soon.

In the meantime all our love to you all,

Kurt

Lenya's Later Life

A New Correspondence Collection

In July 2009, the Weill-Lenya Research purchased a collection of Lotte Lenya's letters and postcards to her friends George Stuart and Vivian Liff, British record collectors and opera mavens. The collection comprises over eighty pieces of correspondence from Lenya, beginning in 1960 and ending in 1981, along with a number of snapshots and clippings. It forms a detailed record of the last twenty years of her life, including her performances, projects, opinions, medical history, and daily ups and downs; it also provides insight into her marriage to Russell Detwiler. Lenya fans will recognize her characteristic style—matter-of-fact, devoid of self-pity, never shy about expressing an opinion—in the passages from the letters below. Minor errors of punctuation and spelling have been tacitly corrected.

On Weill

6 September 1964

"My feeling is that it would be very bad for Kurt Weill if his music should always depend on my doing it. The work is so strong that any good, intelligent performer can do it."

6 September 1964

"In the meanwhile you probably saw the *Schlamme-Holt* evening. If you like her record, then you probably like the evening. The unfortunate thing is that it is called: 'The wonderful world of K.W.' (at least that is what it was called here). Brecht and Weill world is not that sweet, not that charming. It is savage and bitter. I saw it here in N.Y. and I don't think it is any different there. Mr. Holt has no talent for B. and W. and Miss Schlamme has just a little more. But they are successful and easier to digest than *Mahagonny*, which is the world of B. and W."

24 April 1965 (on *Happy End*)

"I really don't think much of the play, which is just too naive and second-hand. I don't think it will ever go in spite of that extraordinary score with all those beautiful songs."

6 March 1972 (on a production at the Piccadilly Theatre, London)

"Nobody listens. I really wonder what Tony Richardson had in mind. The first line spoken in the 3PO is: this opera will be so cheap that bettlers [*sic*] can afford it. What follows? The most elaborate production, with glitter all over the place. Oh, dear."

20 October 1975 (on the Berliner Festwochen)

"I was not even sorry not to have been able to get to Berlin for the Kurt Weill (and others) festival. It would have been a strain on me physically as [well as] emotionally. The festival was a great success for Kurt, and I am especially pleased with the result that the audi-



Lenya during a visit with Liff and Stuart in the early 1960s.

ence had a chance to get acquainted with Kurt's early work, including chamber music and his two symphonies and many other unknown works of his. Until now he was only connected with Brecht and [audiences] had no idea how much he had written before and after."

13 November 1979 (on a production at the Metropolitan Opera)

"I am very busy attending all the rehearsals for *Mahagonny* (opening Nov. 16th). Names probably very familiar to you: John Dexter, director; James Levine, conductor; and Jocelyn Herbert,

costumes. All working very hard to secure a success. Of course one never knows what the critics will have to say. It's a beautiful production, and Kurt Weill would have been very happy to hear that marvelous sounding orchestra."

On Theater and Other Performers

6 September 1964

"The N.Y. repertoire in the theatre is as dull as it can be, since I don't care for musicals, silly comedies, etc."

[Spring 1962] (on *Brecht on Brecht*)

"I am rather busy with a lot of necessary and unnecessary things. One of the unnecessary ones seems to me by now Mr. Brecht's evening (I am up to my ears in 'messages') and only can get out of it through illness. So I escaped for 10 days with a welcome virus. But last night I had to face it again."

15 October 1963

"I never was a fan of Birgit Nilsson. She is a fat cow, who manages a few extraordinary notes sometimes. I adored Flagstad, but I agree with you; Frida Leider WAS greater."

5 March 1964

"I am happy to find out from your letter that you walk out if annoyed in the theater. I thought I am the only one who dares. I could not stand Mr. Miller's play *After the Fall* and walked out in the middle of it. . . . Last night I saw Alec Guinness in *Dylan*. An excellent production, rather interesting play, and astonishing performance by Guinness. The rest of Broadway is taken over by musicals, vulgar ones, vulgar performers like Miss Channing, who everybody 'adores.' Uh—"

9 July 1964

"A nice production of *High Spirits* with that delightful Tammy Grimes and dear B. Lillie (if she remembers her lines. And it really does not matter a bit, if she does or does not.) *Hamlet* with Burton I would love to see, but have no inclination to fight my way through the crowd who stands there daily to see Burton being escorted to his dressing room by Elizabeth Taylor. So I am afraid I will have to miss it."

15 July 1964

"I enjoyed tremendously *Luther* with Albert Finney, which is a great success here, like almost anything that arrives under Her Majesty's flag. I am quite happy about it. It might have some effect on that stale American method theater."

19 January 1966

"We went to an Elisabeth Schwarzkopf concert during the [transit] strike and were happy to find a filled to the rafters Carnegie Hall. She was marvelous that evening. She is singing at the Met *Don Giovanni* and *Falstaff*. We will listen on the radio. I cannot bear their bad productions."

18 September 1978

"Massary I saw many times on stage in Berlin, and there won't be another one with her elegance and wit for a long time to come. She is irreplaceable."

On Herself and Her Work**17 January 1965 (on her Carnegie Hall concert)**

"How I did it, nobody including me will ever know. Some unknown strength took hold of me and I was never as good as that evening. . . . I am sure Kurt Weill was sitting on my shoulder to watch over me."

28 January 1961 (on *Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*)

"It's great fun for me doing that part, which is such a departure from what I've been doing in the past. It seems so easy compared to the agonies I go through on stage. So it is a vacation in every way possible."

25 January 1962 (on *Brecht on Brecht*)

"It's great fun for me. I like that bare stage, with no help of scenery or costumes, just plain talent one has to have. No cheating possible."

6 January 1964

"I received a letter from a friend this morning from London. She saw *From Russia with Love* and was furious about what she called 'wasting my talent.' I don't think one ever wastes a talent. In each part is something which interests one, otherwise one would not do it. This part was too 'ugly' for that friend of mine. I had to laugh. When was I ever a glamour girl?"

5 March 1964 (on a proposed recital with piano)

"That did not sound too good to me. A concert of that kind is infinitely more complicated than a concert with a real singer, who just stands there with a kerchief to hold onto—and let out whatever God has given them. For me it is more difficult. I need rehearsals with the orchestra, the conductor, the whole style of a concert of that nature, takes more time than just a few days."

9 March 1965

"I am deep in *Mother Courage*. I don't like her yet."

18 December 1966

"I was asked many times while playing in Germany: 'Is there a chance, Miss Lenya, that you will come back to us?' And my firm reply was NO. One emigration is enough."

5 January 1967 (on *Cabaret*)

"As soon as I get to my dressing room, I feel relaxed and peaceful. And the part is great fun to play. It has variety. All sorts of different moods, which I like. It would be dreadful to be chained for a year to something one would not like. But then I would not have played it to begin with."

20 October 1975

"A very gifted young playwright with a few successes behind him has written a play for me, which I might do if he agrees to the necessary changes. Otherwise I won't bother. I have refused two movie scripts. Too close to *From Russia with Love*. I don't like to do the same things twice."

18 September 1978

"When I am fully recovered which will take maybe another few months I will start my autobiography. I have already a lot of material collected and it will be only a matter of concentration to work on it. I just founded a Kurt Weill Foundation, which of course is a lot of work and my speed is the one of a tired turtle." [The Foundation had existed since 1962, but legal and administrative reorganization had taken up more of Lenya's time in 1977–78—ed.]



Lenya with George Stuart, early 1960s. Stuart and Liff collected animal sculptures. Photo: Vivian Liff

Recordings

Das Berliner Requiem *Vom Tod im Wald*

also: Hindemith: "Der Tod"
Stravinsky: Octet for Wind
Instruments
Milhaud: *Cantate de la
guerre*, *Cantate de la paix*

I Solisti del Vento
Flemish Radio Choir
Paul Hillier, conductor

Glossa GCDSA 922207

World War I not only obliterated geographical landscapes, it also destroyed the foundations of political life in Europe. Composers born between 1880 and 1900, some of whom had witnessed the horrors of war firsthand, were forced to confront the fact that these old structures had vanished for good, leaving a void that had to be filled. Not surprisingly, such change and upheaval tended to influence their artistic development. Late romanticism, expressionism, and extreme subjectivity came to seem relics of a bygone time as these composers explored and developed new concepts based on their individual experiences. Thus the 1920s emerged as one of the most colorful and diverse decades in music history. The works recorded on this new CD illustrate a facet of this diversity by revealing the responses of four members of this generation—Weill, Hindemith, Stravinsky, and Milhaud—to war, death, and ephemerality, experiences every bit as important in their lives as the more commonly cited novelty and optimism of the "roaring twenties."

At the heart of this recording lies Weill's *Das Berliner Requiem*, a *kleine Kantate* composed in 1928/29, commissioned by Frankfurt Radio. Scored for men's voices and wind orchestra, the performing forces create a lively and nuanced sound that fit within the limitations of early radio technology. Weill based his composition, which he described as "a series of songs about death, commemorative plaques, and epitaphs," on poems by Bertolt Brecht, with whom he had begun to

collaborate in 1927. Up until 1931 Weill continued to revise the order of the individual numbers; he even excised some and published them separately. An authorized version never appeared in print. Today's performing materials are based on a score, edited by David Drew in 1967, which comprises five different numbers (the introductory "Großer Dankchoral" reappears at the end). Drew's version serves also as the basis for this recording, with one exception: Paul Hillier decided to replace the text of the third number, "Epitaph" ("Marterl"), with a Brecht text that Weill had printed as an alternative in a separate publication of the song in 1929. This alternative text makes overt references to the murder of Rosa Luxemburg—1929 marked the tenth anniversary of her death—and corresponds to the "Ballade vom ertrunkenen Mädchen" (Ballad of the drowned girl) which precedes it. This sequence of movements, augmented by the two subsequent "Bericht[e] über den unbekannten Soldaten" (Reports on the unknown soldier), gives the work balance and sharpens its political message. Yet the Flemish Radio Choir, led by Hillier and joined by the virtuoso wind ensemble I Solisti del Vento, avoids the pitfall of interpreting the *Berliner Requiem* as a simplistic piece of agitprop. Rather, the singers deliver Brecht's sarcastic texts with unexpectedly subtle emotion, bringing out some of the hidden lyrical aspects of Weill's score with touching tenderness. The various facets of Weill's style receive due attention: the solemn and voluminous "Großer Dankchoral," the subtle irony that tenor Ivan Goossens supplies at appropriate moments in the "Epitaph," or the "Zweite Bericht über den unbekannten Soldaten," reminiscent of recitatives in Bach's Passions.

One of the pieces that Weill excised from the *Berliner Requiem* before its premiere was *Vom Tod im Wald*, a cantata for bass and wind ensemble composed in 1927. Because its overall compositional design, especially the harmonic language, is far more ambitious than any of the *Requiem's* other numbers, it can claim to be a composition in its own right (after all, it premiered in November 1927 as Weill's last work bearing an opus number, 23). Supported by the bold playing of the wind ensemble, bass Jacob Bloch Jespersen lends the piece a glowing intensity.

Death is also the subject of Paul Hindemith's setting of "Der Tod," a poem he ascribed to Friedrich Hölderlin, though in fact it is by Friedrich Gottlieb

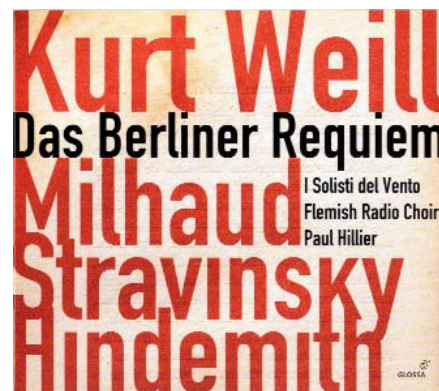
Klopstock. Composed in 1931, the four-part male chorus musically portrays death as a "gentle savior," thus countering some of the text's more gruesome images. The Flemish Radio Choir captures this gestus by singing softly.

Darius Milhaud's *Cantate de la paix* (1937) for three female voices and mixed chorus and its companion piece, *Cantate de la guerre* (1940) for four soloists and mixed chorus, are based on richly metaphorical religious poems by Paul Claudel, with whom Milhaud collaborated on several projects. The Flemish Choir's polished interpretation of the two works, presented in reverse chronological order, leaves nothing to be desired and thus sets a high standard as the only recording of these two rarities currently available.

Igor Stravinsky's Octet for Wind Instruments, placed between the choral pieces by Hindemith and Milhaud, provides an opportunity for the Solisti del Vento to demonstrate their technical capabilities and musical brilliance. The work's serene and sparkling idiom, bordering at times on caricature, does not seem compatible with the other works on this recording, at least not at first glance; perhaps the *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, dedicated to the memory of Debussy, would have been a more obvious choice. But if one views the style of *Neue Sachlichkeit* as a means of masking the self intent on protecting its vulnerable core, the choice of Stravinsky's Octet makes sense.

The CD packaging, lavishly designed, offers a detailed booklet in English, French, German, Dutch, and Spanish.

Susanne Schaal-Gotthardt
Hindemith Institut, Frankfurt



Books

Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater

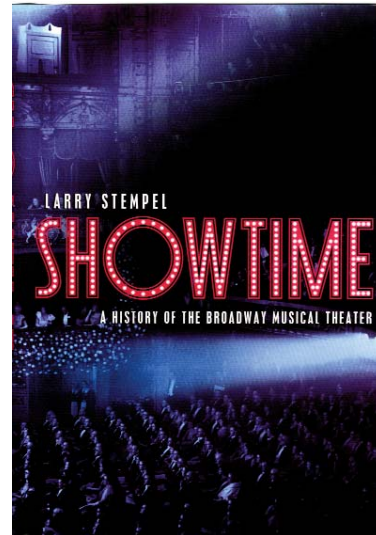
Larry Stempel

New York: W. W. Norton, 2010, xx, 826 pp.
ISBN: 978-0-393-06715-6

The progression of Broadway musicals from the fringes closer to the mainstream of the scholarly canon that began in the late 1980s has been one of the more interesting features of recent developments in musicology. There is now a decent set of surveys of the genre, plus a growing number of relevant biographies (of people and, as it were, of single works), critical studies, and aesthetic essays. Conferences abound, dedicated journals provide outlets for new research, and musicologists better known in different arenas are following in the footsteps of those brave pioneers who for so long must have felt they were crying in the wilderness. In part, the impetus has come from opera studies, and in part from the “new musicology”; one subtext has also been the rights and responsibilities of the U.S. version of our discipline to engage in specifically American topics.

None of that was the case back in 1979, when Larry Stempel first proposed the present book to W. W. Norton (so we learn in his preface; p. xix). He had already shown a rough outline to Lehman Engel, who mentored Stempel (“a budding songwriter,” we learn on p. xv) in the BMI Musical Theater Workshop. That outline has taken thirty years to come to fruition (the preface is dated October 2009), and Stempel offers a thorough acknowledgment in his introductory chapter of what has changed in the meantime. It must have been a challenge to keep pace. But as he argues, with all the detailed studies now emerging, “Might the time not now be ripe, therefore, for a scholarly reassessment of the history of the medium itself?” (p. 13). Most of us have fallen into the same trap at one point or another: a too grand prefatory claim promises what cannot feasibly be delivered. In many ways, however, the problems are more interesting than their solutions.

Stempel certainly deserves credit for the overarching vision embodied in a subtitle (“a history of the Broadway musical theater”) that many would instead have treated as a title, with some further explanation following a colon to articulate a specific agenda (e.g., Joseph P. Swain, “a critical and musical survey”; John Bush Jones, “a social history of the American musical theatre”; Scott McMillin, “a study of the principles and conventions behind musical shows from Kern to Sondheim”; Raymond Knapp, “. . . and the formation of national identity” with a second volume on “the performance of personal identity”). But there are obvious difficulties in writing, instead, a less ideologically laden “history” even after one has decided whether it should cover either (or both) institutions and the people behind them, or the musical-theatrical works they produced, and if the latter, just how “musical” or “theatrical” to be. The material is vast, creative roles are blurred, the work-concept is iffy, chronologies are problematic, and too many musicals survive only as titles. Post-Marxist historians might have a field day analyzing the commodified production and consumption of the



musical-theater industry, but where would that leave the *Show Boats*, *Oklahoma!*s, or *Evitas* that still have their currencies today (well, maybe not *Show Boat*, but that is a different problem)?

Stempel inevitably takes a middle path in terms of approach, and also between the professorial and the populist. His spotlight on the “Broadway” musical theater rather than, say, the “American,” suggests an institutional focus—which is certainly present in the book—instead of a more broadly cultural one, but in the end he is primarily concerned with a sequence of works deemed significant for whatever reason. His “history” roughly from George L. Aiken’s musical version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) to *The Producers* (2001) is divided into three broad parts: “Out of the Nineteenth Century,” “Into the Twentieth Century,” “Toward the New Millennium”—leaving the mid-twentieth-century “golden age” in an interesting position. Each part is subdivided into chapters organized thematically, with each chapter preceded by a list of the main works covered therein (these lists include production details, and also identify a very oddly abbreviated selection of each work’s “songs”). This thematic organization plays a certain amount of havoc with chronology: for example, we do not get a detailed account of choreographers Agnes de Mille and Jerome Robbins (in the chapter “A Dancing Place” in “Toward the New Millennium”) until after a discussion of “The Metaphor Angle” from *Cabaret* (1966) to *Assassins* (1990). There is a kind of logic to that, but it makes the book quite difficult to use.

Readers of the present review will no doubt be asking how Kurt Weill fares in all this. As one might expect from his somewhat awkward position in the Broadway canon, the answer is not very well. *Johnny Johnson* (1936) heads toward the new millennium in a chapter “Away from Broadway” that also discusses the contribution of the 1954 revival of *The Threepenny Opera* in launching the off-Broadway musical. *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938) comes two hundred pages earlier with a brief mention among musicals containing political satire (though the chapter is titled “Broadway Songbook”). *Lady in the Dark* (1940) receives a long account (pp. 293–99) in “The Script Angle” for its role in the emergence of the “musical play” (*Oklahoma!* follows); *The Firebrand of Florence* (1945) has one brief reference; *Street Scene* (1946) gets decent coverage (pp. 392–97) in “Opera, In Our Own Way” (*West Side Story* follows); *Love Life* (1948) once more has a millennial goal as an early “concept musical”; and *Lost in the Stars* (1949) appears occasionally as a

“Broadway opera.” The surprising omission (only four passing mentions) is *One Touch of Venus* (1943), which was one of the more conventional of Weill’s Broadway works, and also, by several measures, his most successful. It seems that poor old Weill just cannot win; he is often accused of selling out to the commercial theater, yet those who should appreciate his Broadway smarts fail to do so.

Stempel barely discusses the movie versions of his chosen musicals—not that it would have helped with *Venus*—and indeed ignores the separate genre of the movie musical. This is fair enough given his subtitle—it would be unreasonable to point out that movie musicals were often first screened in New York’s theater district prior to their general release—and those of us who teach courses on the American musical are tired of using corrupt film adaptations of Broadway classics to get some kind of point across. Yet Stempel’s position is symptomatic of a situation where scholars of stage musicals often separate themselves from those (fewer) who study the cinematic genre, despite the evident intertextualities, and also competition, between the two media. As I read it, the latter is one reason for the rise of the more substantial “musical play” in the 1940s, once it became clear that the stage found it harder and harder to compete with silver-screen razzmatazz in glorious Technicolor. There is also presumably some point to be made of the similar sub-

ject matters of Leonard Bernstein’s *On the Town* (premiered 28 December 1944) and MGM’s *Anchors Aweigh* (which opened in New York City on 19 July 1945). The latter starred Kathryn Grayson, Gene Kelly, and Frank Sinatra, plus newcomer Pamela Britton, who had just resigned from the role of Ado Annie in the touring company of *Oklahoma!*—while one of the dancers from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s original production (Ray Harrison) was now out on the town, as it were, courtesy of Jerome Robbins.

Anyone working on American musicals becomes fascinated by such trivia, which may not be so trivial after all. There’s not much of that in Stempel’s book which prefers, instead, the grand overview. At 826 pages, it is heavy reading in both senses of the term, and its navigational difficulties are not helped by the copious but none-too-analytical index. I found more pleasure, and even benefit, dipping into it rather than trying to go from cover to cover, and I ended up finding more questions than answers. But there’s no great harm in that, and much to the good.

Tim Carter

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Performances

One Touch of Venus

Shaw Festival

Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario

Premiere: 16 May 2010

Now approaching its fiftieth season, the Shaw Festival until very recently devoted itself to the plays of George Bernard Shaw, arguably the greatest British playwright after Shakespeare, and his contemporaries, especially Oscar Wilde and Noel Coward. Its productions, populated by an often splendid company of actors, had a rousing good time with Shaw’s antic seriousness but also developed a reputation for powerful domestic drama by a wide range of playwrights, usually English or American.

About ten years ago, beginning with a spirited revival of Joe Masteroff, Jerry Bock, and Sheldon Harnick’s *She Loves Me* (1963), it broadened its mandate to include plays written later but set during Shaw’s long lifetime (1856–1950). It could now both portray and comment on the myriad changes in behavior and attitudes from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. The Shaw has mastered the world as

it was during those years: the changing rhythms of speech, evolutions in fashion and style, the way one moves and sits, even the different ways one holds a cigarette. The Shaw also has a long history of reviving neglected plays whose value re-emerges in productions that are true to the period yet brimming with life, perhaps most notably in the 1980s and 1990s with the works of Harley Granville Barker and J.B. Priestley, but also work by such forgotten women playwrights as Githa Sowerby and Cicely Hamilton. The Shaw has also been reviving musicals for just as long, though not often as well.

Just last year, in what felt like an attempt to pander to audiences, Artistic Director Jackie Maxwell stretched the mandate once again, rather painfully, to include plays “written in the spirit of Shaw,” whatever that means. Fortunately, the play covered in this review—Kurt Weill, Ogden Nash, and S.J. Perelman’s *One Touch of Venus*—opened during Shaw’s lifetime, in 1943. No matter what you think of Maxwell’s new policy, *Venus* lies legitimately within the Festival’s purview.

Musicals at the Shaw are almost always popular—probably because revivals of hit shows by familiar names often are—but they lack the polish, oomph, and pizzazz that made Broadway what it was beginning in the 1920s and continuing through much of the 1950s. Both observations pertain to the production of *One Touch of Venus*, which ran from May to October 2010,

along with nine other plays. This musical is not widely known among theater audiences, so it is doubly unfortunate that this revival of *One Touch of Venus* fits the usual Shaw pattern. Part of the problem was the reduced orchestrations used by music director Paul Sportelli, with the permission of the show’s publishers. The result sounds thin, even tinny; it might have been better to go with two pianos and a drum rather than a pale reflection of a pit band.

When Whitelaw Savory, a self-important and fabulously wealthy art collector, exhibits an ancient statue of Venus, an innocent but not very bright barber named Rodney Hatch puts an engagement ring intended for his shrewish girlfriend on its finger. The impulsive act isn’t quite believable, especially since the nebbish of a barber isn’t very imaginative, but it’s no worse than the conceit of having a dance director cast a musical chorus by asking the dancers to talk about their lives. Venus comes to life in a stroke of thunder. She and the barber fall in love but later separate amicably when his vision of suburban life in Ozone Heights bores her silly. The downhearted barber soon escapes his domineering fiancée and her equally grating mother when he meets a mortal who’s a dead ringer for Venus and who loves Ozone Heights. Curtain.

The book’s reputation for satirizing modern art and suburban life, and for sophisticated sexual banter, has survived. It has some very funny lines that border on



Mrs. Kramer (Gabrielle Jones), Molly (Deborah Hay), and others prepare to track down Rodney in "Catch the Hatch." Photo: Emily Cooper

the cynical; "Love is the triumphant twang of a bedspring" is my favorite. Yet the book feels as if Perelman reined in his deliciously wacky humor in search of a hit. More than sixty years later, his mockery of several safe targets—potential mothers-in-law and hoity-toity art lovers among them—remains funny and genial although it has lost most of its teeth. And yet it also has those tiny moments that Perelman fans will relish: the name Whitelaw Savory, who is anything but, and the choice of Ozone Heights (the name is probably derived from Ozone Park, a blue-collar neighborhood in Queens) as the embodiment of the rather unworldly Rodney's imagined idyllic life with the otherworldly Venus.

One Touch of Venus is a city musical, bustling and broad, and feels closer in spirit to Rodgers and Hart's *Pal Joey* (1940) or Frank Loesser's *Guys and Dolls* (1950) than Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* (1943). In "Forty Minutes for Lunch," director Eda Holmes's blocking reminded me of "Runyonland," *Guys and Dolls'* opening pastiche of street life in New York City, though her version is much clumsier. More generally, the staging is cramped—a problem that afflicts most of the musicals on the small stage of the Royal George Theatre. Musicals from that period are expansive, with production numbers that overflow the stage. Not here. The dancing is energetic and noisy but not especially expressive. The production moves briskly, and there are moments when the onstage limitations are an advantage. The basic set,

designed by Camellia Koo, consists of movable panels that suggest the shape of skyscrapers, but two scenes are performed "in one," in front of a closed curtain, while the set is being changed, as it would have been done in the 1940s. It's a necessary—but very nice—touch.

Having already composed *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938) and *Lady in the Dark* (1941) in the United States, Weill had no difficulty creating a new score that had the feel of a Broadway show: musically varied yet rooted in familiar song types, from waltzes to a barbershop quartet to music for two dream ballets. What matters most about the score, though, is the large number of ballads, appropriate in a musical about the goddess of love. In addition to the haunting beguine, "Speak Low," Weill wrote richly romantic melodies for "West Wind," "I'm a Stranger Here Myself," and "Foolish Heart." Although "Speak Low" is the great standard to emerge from the score, in many ways it is a generic love song. My vote for the best song in the score would go to "That's Him," where Weill and his lyricist—and the song and the character who sings it—become one. It is a song about telling yourself the truth but not taking yourself too seriously when you do it. Nash, best known for his light verse, was making only his second attempt at lyrics for Broadway; the first was a flop from twelve years earlier. His lyric is perfectly workmanlike, but it reaches another plane when he finds the right balance between humor and feeling, creating a gentle irony set off

by Weill's ruminative melody. The song is both clever and touching, a fine example of the conversational lyric in a song that masters an unlikely but irresistible combination of sentiment and wit. Elsewhere in the show, "How Much I Love You," is an exemplar of Nashian wordplay.

You're obviously not going to find any blatant references to sex in a wartime musical, and certainly *Venus* appears to be relatively clean despite Perelman's double entendres and the necessity for the goddess of love to have sex appeal. Just as Ado Annie brings innocence and enthusiasm to the comic suggestiveness in the secondary plot in *Oklahoma!*, so in *Venus*, effervescence and charm in the performance of the leading lady take the place of anything overtly erotic. Yet actors who thrive in ensemble companies rarely have the star power required in musicals. *One Touch of Venus*, which originally starred Mary Martin as Venus, is a good example. Robin Evan Willis certainly looked the part. She is a tall, striking blonde, and costume designer Michael Gianfrancesco dressed her beautifully in a flowing white gown. Although her voice was pleasant, it conveyed little emotion, and her Venus was neither sexually compelling nor otherworldly. Willis was just a blond actress playing a part. Julie Martell as Gloria Kramer, Rodney's original girlfriend, was merely crass; her nasal shrieking made my earlobes curl and demonstrated once again that the Shaw consistently gets New York City accents wrong. Kyle Blair as Rodney Hatch was an appealing juvenile with a high tenor as sweet as his character. He moved gracefully, and his ability to combine that sweetness with comic confusion made the character both goofy and likeable. Mark Uhre as Savory was properly villainous, with a touch of melodrama in his conniving that suited the production's broad style. *One Touch of Venus* wasn't terrible; sometimes it was quite charming, but it was never anything but earthbound.

Michael Lasser
Rochester, N.Y.

Performances

Der Silbersee

Stadttheater Bremerhaven

Premiere: 22 May 2010

Director Sarah Kohrs deserves a large share of credit for making sure that Weill and Kaiser's social criticism still sends frequent chills up our spines, despite balmy weather outside. Well-placed theatrical effects do not get in the way of the drama and the opera, and the lighting always matches the mood onstage. A few historical props such as Olim's police uniform and Severin's wheelchair create an atmosphere reminiscent of the early 1930s. For the opening scene, black and silvery (cardboard) tree trunks hang stylishly from the flies to represent the woods by the Silver Lake, where Hunger in the form of a straw effigy is being laid to rest. The futility of such a rite is aptly demonstrated when Hunger comes back to life: the puppet (Maria Hoshi) mocks the starving ones in a frenzied dance and turns them into volitionless, obedient creatures. When sheer deprivation leads Severin to steal a pineapple during the gang's robbery of a grocery store (the period set prepared with great care by Marcel Zaba), the action shifts uneasily from a quasi-mythical beginning to a realistic depiction of unemployment and misery.

The cast conveys the characters' changing fates from poverty to affluence with great commitment, and occasionally one can detect their original background as either singers or actors. The orchestra, led by Richard Fletcher, provided extremely reliable accompaniment with an outstanding brass section (especially the first trumpet). Ralph Ertel's unyielding tenor brings out both Severin's pain caused by hunger and his thirst for revenge that ultimately leads to reconciliation, but his spoken lines are not fully audible until

Act II, so his delirious fantasies about a pineapple forest remain somewhat pale. Wolfgang Scheiner portrays Olim's change of heart from prosecutor to protector with grand gestures and a fine baritone. His "dialogue" with the invisible chorus (in the pit) turns into a true theatrical moment when the textile walls of his office begin to move, and impressions of hands and faces become visible to create a living frieze that mirrors his inner feelings. Later, as Severin recuperates in bed, we see in the background a ballet of four dancing fried chickens chased by a spoon-wielding cook. Such an amusing exaggeration of Olim's generous impulses, evoking life in a castle with every possible earthly delight, foreshadows the misfortune that the newly crowned lottery winner will encounter. The great hall of the two-story castle reflects Olim's sudden riches. The production's most elaborate set is done up only in shades of gold, while the turntable allows glimpses into the posh bedroom of Frau von Luber to the left and into the shabby quarters assigned to the impoverished Fennimore on the right. Ann Juliette Schindewolf's effortless portrayal of von Luber as scheming housekeeper or decadent paramour (at the side of Baron Laur, played by Monolito Mario Franz) creates a believable character who does not think twice when she has a chance to extort Olim in the attic. At the same time, we can see Severin in the basement, where he has asked his friends to tie him up

so he can let go of his desire for revenge and forgive Olim. The simultaneity of the two scenes, connected by a spiral staircase, reminds one of Weill's *Die Bürgschaft* but also of *The Eternal Road*, where the device is used on a much larger scale, of course.

Given the constant humiliation and degradation inflicted by her aunt, Fennimore's suicide, gruesomely staged toward the end, seems inevitable. Previously, Fennimore (Nelly Palmer) had sung about another violent death in "Cäsars Tod"—unlikely dinner music—which in 1933 was immediately understood as an unambiguous and risky attack on Hitler. For the final scene, a silky fabric covers the entire stage, emphasizing the work's fairy-tale character once again. Having lost their possessions but gained a friendship, Severin and Olim step incredulously onto the frozen lake. The future is uncertain as the piece returns to its mythical beginnings, but now there is at least a path. Layered drapes descending from the flies create the effect of a destination that lies infinitely far away, and the protagonists recede slowly into the distance with the final measures of the music. Thus intendant Peter Griesebach ends his tenure in Bremerhaven with this five-performance run, and he has treated the audience to a *Silbersee* that captivates and resonates.

Jan-Hendrik von Stemm
Bremen



Olim (Wolfgang Scheiner) and Frau von Luber (Ann Juliette Schindewolf) meet in the attic. Photo: Rillke & Sandelmann

Performances

Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny

*Teatro Real
Madrid*

Premiere: 30 September 2010

This fall Madrid saw its first full-blown production, with prominent opera singers and original orchestrations, of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*. Weill's opera had seen a partial run in a commercial theater in the eighties, with non-professional singers, and an unauthorized performance was given three years ago at the Teatro Español, in a less "operatic" and more "theatrical" staging, in which both orchestrations and vocal lines were drastically altered.

The present production marked the official beginning of the tenure of Gerard Mortier as artistic director of the Teatro Real. At a press conference before the premiere, Mortier explained that he had chosen Michael Feingold's English-language version of the opera instead of the original German, because he wanted the Madrid public to understand the text and get a better feel for the work by presenting it in a more contemporary, relevant way. And he insisted on the full treatment: twelve performances, top-quality international stars (most of them North American), two singers each for Jenny and Jim, a production by the avant-garde Catalan group La Fura dels Baus, and his own hand-picked musical director, Pablo Heras-Casado.

Heras-Casado, 32, a tall, imposing figure and a forceful, elegant conductor of the hands-only variety, has specialized in contemporary music. He recently received rave reviews with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Dresden Staatskapelle and the Amsterdam Concertgebouw; he is scheduled to conduct the Berlin Philharmonic next year.

I have heard the Real orchestra often in the last few years, and it used to sound like a reliable but average, occasionally sloppy group. Under Heras-Casado it sounded vibrant and exciting, alive to the rhythmic intricacies of Weill's score. The maestro took them just to the brink of parody, but



Jim (Michael König) and Jenny (Measha Bruegggosman) surrounded by a mob of Mahagonnyites at the end of Act II. Photo: Javier del Real

never quite crossing over, and kept the volume up but always well balanced with the singers, a few of whom did not have particularly bombastic voices.

As for La Fura dels Baus, the incoming artistic director was well aware of their growing reputation in Spain and beyond for high-quality productions embracing new technology and acid social commentary. By the way, the name of the group is a combination of "fura," the Catalan word for ferret, and Baus, the name of a now dry swamp in the region near Barcelona where the original members came from.

The Barcelona creative team started in the late 1970s as street performers. They now run a franchise with six artistic direc-

tors and are able to take on parallel projects (at the same time *Mahagonny* plays in Madrid, other branches of La Fura are performing at the Shanghai universal exhibition, the Valladolid theatre festival, and the La Maestranza opera house in Seville). Sometimes they seem to extend themselves beyond their ability to innovate and shock with so many different projects going on at once, as with the uneven *Les Troyens* which opened the Valencia season last year. But when they're at the top of their game, La Fura dels Baus can produce a Wagner opera or a Shakespeare play as you've never seen it before—or even dreamed possible. This is what they did with the double-bill of Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* and Janáček's



Cellophane-clad girls await the lumberjacks when they arrive in *Mahagonny*. Photo: Javier del Real

Diary of One who Disappeared in Barcelona, or the recent *Ring des Nibelungen* in Valencia.

The basic idea behind their *Mahagonny* is bold, imaginative, and consistent with the group's history. In the middle of a deep economic crisis in Spain, which has also hit the Teatro Real budget, the Fura masterminds decided to dispense with their usual high-tech video, their signature elaborate metal contraptions, and their army of talented acrobats. In tune with their reading of Weill and Brecht's criticism of the society of waste and consumption, almost all the sets and props in this *Mahagonny* are crap. Yes, literal crap: the stage is a dump with mounds of garbage, where plastic bags fall continually from rusty cranes. The props are old plastic garden chairs, an abandoned refrigerator, and a cheap street vendor's hot dog stand with the neon sign, "Hotel of Rich People." A motley collection of metal school canteen tables serves as material for a dam to protect the citizens from the impending hurricane and as the scaffold for Jim to be executed. And the flag of the new city is a pair of cheap bright-red oversized panties (the widow Begbick's?).

So much for the things onstage; what about the people?

When La Fura went from street performance, getting in people's faces with their techno-acrobatics, to producing well-known operas, they brought new ideas to the genre, but they were also criticized for not paying enough attention to character development. Many times the singers were left to do as they pleased as imposing images flashed on the wall behind them. The acting in the Valencia *Ring* worked fine because the principals already had many

Brünnhildes, Wotans, or Hagens to their credit under great directors. But in *Les Troyens*, with many singers taking their first crack at the work, they basically just stood there, like Pavarotti or Caballé. Their bodies did not form part of the visual imagery of the show. To some extent, that was because Valencia hired only the "stunning visuals" part of the Fura team—director Carlus Padrissa, videographer Franc Aleu, and set designer Roland Olbeter—but not the one Fura founder who has worked extensively with actors, Alex Ollé.

Mortier knew better: both Ollé and Padrissa were on board for this production, together with the independent set designer Alfons Flores, a frequent collaborator of Calixto Bieito. Most of the singers were new to their parts, but they moved among the debris and delivered their razor-sharp lines like sure-footed veterans. The beginning of Act III, when Jim rises in chains from his bed of garbage, while pale fires illuminate heaps of filth in the back, was a wonderfully potent metaphor.

Jim sings his lament in *Heldentenor* fashion, and the scene is an unmistakable allusion to Florestan's aria of at the beginning of Act II of *Fidelio*. But of course, his Leonore (their love duet comes right before the execution in this production) does not come to his rescue, and neither does his



Jim (Michael König) and Jenny (Measha Brueggemann) during the trial scene. Photo: Javier del Real

best friend. Jim is burned to death, à la *Götterdämmerung*, under the mattresses where the city whores performed their duty during the “loving match” of Act II. One can escape from Pizarro’s tyranny, but there’s no escape from the tyranny of the dollar, this production seems to emphasize. “Nothing will help him, or us, or you now.”

Even before then there were many felicitous moments when text and score found perfect visual matches. For example, in the first scene, Fatty the Bookkeeper and Trinity Moses emerge from the rubbish and Leocadia Begbick steps out of a wrecked fridge to found the city of pleasure. In Act II, when the hurricane passes Mahagonny by and the philosophy of self-indulgence is consecrated, the eating contest in which Jack gorges to death is staged with a long metal trough filled to the brim with forage from a long tube. But the scene I found the funniest was the “loving match”: the girls perform a precise, hilarious gym routine, the exact choreographed depiction of the “forced happiness” that Jim had just denounced.

The night I attended (8 October), Jim MacIntyre was sung by German tenor Michael König. Unlike the singers playing his companions from the hard Alaska days, König had the burly frame and laborer’s gait of a lumberjack. His potent, malleable tenor, which shone in the last act, and his

impeccable American diction served him well as he portrayed the doomed rebel.

Canadian soprano Measha Brueggergosman, a growing name in Europe, sang Jenny. Her unusual career is solidly grounded so far on new music and twentieth-century classics. At the beginning her voice sounded very small, even for the modest dimensions of the Teatro Real. As the evening progressed, her power grew, and she maintained throughout a beautiful, expressive, secure tone from the bottom to the top of her range. Her stage presence was mesmerizing, and by the end her character developed the stature of other imposing Brechtian icons of female common-sense fortitude.

The trio of fugitives who found Mahagonny and preside over its heartless growth were very well cast: full-voiced mezzo Jane Henschel, vibrant tenor Donald Kaasch, and noble, bronze-sounding bass-baritone Willard White, all of them fine acting singers, played their roles with the slow, deliberately menacing movements of a leather-clad road-movie bad guy. Henschel was the only one who had done *Mahagonny* before, but all three took their characters to heart, and used their command of body language and the intricacies of American English to make their portrayals both realistic and surreal. The scene in which they play attorney,

prosecutor, and judge, sentencing Jim to death, had the perfect combination of farce and understatement.

John Easterlin (Jack O’Brien), Steven Humes (Alaska Wolf Joe), and Otto Katzameier (Bank Account Bill) turned the trio of woodcutters into well-drawn individual characters and blended with precision and gusto in the ensemble numbers. Each took full advantage of his moment—the death by gluttony, the boxing match, and the betrayal of Jim, respectively—to make an indelible mark on the audience.

In the end, less was more with this unusually austere but ultimately respectful and intelligent production of *Mahagonny* in Madrid.

Roberto Herrscher
Madrid



Mahagonny self-destructs in the final scene as the residents brandish their banners. Photo: Javier del Real

Performances

Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny

Theater am Gärtnerplatz
Munich

Premiere: 18 June 2010

Fir trees swaying in the background, flashes of light zipping around the stage, a giant moon shining above, and people in glimmering costumes dancing: The latest production of Weill's opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* at the Gärtnerplatz presents itself as a colorful show, an evening full of entertainment—but what is it doing in an opera house? It all starts as Leokadja Begbick, dressed as an animal trainer (in top hat and tails, with a whip), proclaims the founding of Mahagonny, the City of Nets. Mahagonny, the city of pleasure. But Mahagonny, the circus? The figures onstage are gross caricatures. With funny dresses, clown make-up, deforming masks, and artificial movements, the characters inhabit the realm of the comic. Fatty and Moses, for instance, who are almost indistinguishable, present most of the scene titles as a slapstick duo. In the final scene, when Mahagonny collapses in anarchy and the inhabitants sink into disorientation and helplessness, Fatty grins almost diabolically at the audience. This image caps a deeply grotesque production with a touch of the bizarre. But to what extent can this interpretation be justified?

In one of his explanatory notes on *Mahagonny*, Weill wrote, "The *presentation* of the work should not drift into the realm of the ironic or the grotesque. Because the action is not symbolic but typical, theatrical devices and expressions of the individual performer should be used *very sparingly*" (Preface to the stage directions of the opera *Mahagonny*; emphasis in the original). Furthermore, as Weill points out, the postures and the expressions of the actorsingers should be simple and natural, as they are already suggested in the gestic character of the music.

Weill and Brecht conceived *Mahagonny* first and foremost for a thinking audience, not a laughing audience. Considering how the different layers of the music are skill-



Dreieinigkeitsmoses (Stefan Sevenich) and Fatty (Cornel Frey) announce the title of the next scene.

Photo: Hermann Posch

fully interwoven, how the songs are embedded into greater musical forms and how the opera positions itself in the great tradition of the genre—not only in a parodic, but a most progressive way—the shortcomings of the production become startlingly clear. Stage director Thomas Schulte-Michels (who is also responsible for the set design) seems to use the opera's song style primarily as an excuse to settle for entertainment, exemplified on stage by the characters' continual prancing. But staging the opera as a show or a revue conceals to some extent Weill's intention of displaying typical human attitudes and affairs. The inherent criticism of capitalism and radical consumerism (as well as their influences on human society) forfeits some of its expressiveness if presented only as something entertaining or ridiculous. An interpretation like this reduces the potential of the opera as a serious work of art as well as its possible impact on the listener.

Nevertheless there are a few moments when the staging actually does justice to the opera. In the third act the court case is vividly shown for what it really is: a farce, an event designed to amuse and make more money. Begbick and Moses play judge and prosecutor in crude, flashy robes, while Fatty encourages the audience to applaud what is happening on stage. Justice becomes mere spectacle, and art is replaced by kitsch. For the salon piece *A Maiden's Prayer* the stage is rearranged as a concert hall; everyone is dressed up and enraptured by the pianist's playing. Only Jim condemns this overblown respect for the second-rate. Beyond doubt the human beings portrayed in *Mahagonny* are alienated by the extreme hedonism and materialism

dominating the city. Such alienation even leads to Jim Mahoney's expressed desire not to be human at all.

Wolfgang Schwaninger's performance as Jim demonstrates great acting skills and astonishing stage presence. He endows his role with a kind of credibility that the production in general lacks. Filled with fear of the impending dawn, broken and desperate yet honest and humane, he presents a most impressive aria at the beginning of Act III and sets himself apart from his fellow singers: Jenny (Heike Susanne Daum) in a red Charleston dress (costumes by Tanja Liebermann), Begbick (Ann-Katrin Naidu), Fatty (Cornel Frey), Moses (Stefan Sevenich), Jack (Adrian Xhema), Bill (Gregor Dalal), and Joe (Sebastian Campione). Conductor Andreas Kowalewitz, who filled in for David Stahl in some performances, creates a wonderfully lively, accurate, sharply defined, and never labored sound.

Certainly the combination of popular music and operatic form, the extraordinary dramaturgy, the intrinsic social and political criticism, and the astonishing topicality of the subject matter present difficulties in staging the work. Yet these aspects evoke the perpetual fascination of the opera and mark the challenges every production of *Mahagonny* must meet. This production flattens the opera by reducing it to a few of its constituent elements and fails to make the most of its range of facets.

Julia Zupancic

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich

Performances

Zaubernacht

Musikfest Stuttgart

2 September 2010

Want to escape the deadening routine of the annual *Nutcracker* ritual? Help is on the way! It's called *Zaubernacht* (*Magic Night*), a highlight of the recent Stuttgart Music Festival at the Bachakademie, where it scored a unanimous success. It dates from 1922, and it received its first performance that year under the German title *Zaubernacht* shortly before Christmas at Berlin's Theater am Kurfürstendamm, billed as a "Children's Pantomime." It was created by the Russian writer and impresario Wladimir Boritsch and the promising young composer Kurt Weill, then just a 22-year-old fledgling student of Ferruccio Busoni. George Weller, a musical nobody, conducted, but a theatrical *somebody* directed: Franz Ludwig Hörth of the Berlin State

Opera, who went on to stage the legendary premiere of *Wozzeck* three years later. Mary Zimmermann provided the choreography, and the dancers came from her local school. The critics were duly impressed, and Busoni himself wrote: "In *Zaubernacht* Dr. Boritsch has created a pleasing and effective production, particularly suited for children's and Christmas plays. In addition Mr. Kurt Weill has written an orchestral accompaniment which I consider admirably successful, melodious, and in character. The production is earnestly recommended to all stages wishing to offer their public a light yet artistic piece."

For decades, a holograph piano score with scattered instrumental cues was the only surviving artifact, prepared for rehearsal purposes and also used for an abridged American performance three years later at New York's Garrick Theatre, choreographed by Michio Ito. Only ten years ago, British composer Meirion Bowen requested permission to reconstruct Weill's orchestration of *Zaubernacht* from this piano score. Bowen's version was first performed (unstaged) at a concert in Cologne on 1 June 2000 by Ensemble Contrasts Köln, conducted by Celso Antunes; this live performance later appeared on CD (Capriccio 67 011). A few staged produc-

tions followed in Dessau, Düsseldorf, and Essen, choreographed by Milan Sládek. The 2004 Bregenz Festival, which featured several of Weill's stage works, hosted a bastardized production at the Werkstattbühne. On this occasion *Zaubernacht* was performed by the abcdancecompany of St. Pölten, with musical accompaniment provided by the CD. Nicolas Musin's choreography turned the scenario into a comic strip of human foibles and follies, a grotesquerie in style of the cabaret dances from the Berlin of the "Roaring Twenties."

The situation changed entirely in 2005 when a long-forgotten safe was opened at Yale University's main library and yielded among many other items the original instrumental parts for *Zaubernacht*, created for the Berlin performance in 1922. Elmar Juchem tells the story in the introductory essay of the critical edition of *Zaubernacht* (KWE, Series I, Volume 0), which presents the work in full score as reconstructed from the parts (see also vol. 24, no. 2 of the *Newsletter*). And now Stuttgart has presented, at least approximately, the music as heard at the premiere in the "first performance of the Kurt Weill Edition."

We must recall that in 1922 "Ballettpantomime" was still a widely used term in the wake of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* as well as of Josef Bayer's highly popular *Puppenfee* (as *Fairy Doll*—a favorite of Anna Pavlova's), which even today draws crowds at the Vienna State Opera, 120 years after its first performance in 1888. Like *Puppenfee*, *Zaubernacht* relates a fairy story, in which children's dreams come to life at night under a fairy's spell, which she casts by singing the "Lied der Fee" near the beginning of the work. The sleeping brother and sister then intermingle with their toys and experience strange and wonderful adventures.

The Stuttgart production stayed fairly close to the original scenario, which survives only in outline. The program lists the characters as The Toy Fairy (the only singing part), while the rest of the cast is composed of dancers: a Boy, a Girl, a Jumping Jack, the double role of The Horse & The Pilot (The Soldier), The Doll, The Bear, and The Tumbler. The chamber ensemble consists of nine instruments: a string quartet plus double bass, flute, bassoon, piano, and percus-



The Girl (Kira Senkpiel) and the Horse (Erik Reisinger). Photo: Holger Schneider

The Fairy (Nastasja Docalu) sings her aria, awakening the toys. Photo: Holger Schneider

sion (2 players). The dancers were a hand-picked group of freelancers, performing as Nina Kurzeja & Ensemble, with the Arte Ensemble Hannover (all soloists of the NDR Radiophilharmonie) as musicians and initiators of the project. Kurzeja is a respected contemporary choreographer from Stuttgart's fringe scene, and she provided the concept, choreography, and direction, while Bernhard Eusterschulte designed the set and acted as dramaturg. The technical staff took care of video, graphics, flying objects, and light design. The performance took place at the Theaterhaus, Stuttgart's studio theater for workshop productions. There were three well-attended performances of the one-hour piece, all vigorously applauded.

And so we were invited by the Toy Fairy into the loosely connected dream scenes. It all happens on an airy stage divided into four parts, with just the simplest props and some transparent screens on which chalk drawings are projected, lending the performance a slightly surrealist air. The colorful costumes were well designed and fully appropriate to the characters.

Kurzeja's choreography presents a mix of styles—ballet, modern, *Tanztheater*, cir-

cus, cabaret—tailor-made for the singularly gestural music. I wish, though, that the action had partaken more of caricature, sharper and edgier, like the drawings of George Grosz and Otto Dix. Even so, it was vastly entertaining, and obviously the dancers enjoyed every moment of it—most of all the clumsy Bear, performed by a middle-aged woman (Diane Marstboom), who delivered her Charleston syncopations with relish and humor.

But most of all I enjoyed Weill's music, its joyous, infectious melodies and sprightly bounces. It is marvelously orchestrated, transparent, and certainly eminently danceable, with its jaunty rhythms definitely tickling one's soles, and some other parts of the body, too. I had to remind myself constantly to refrain from bursting into uncontrolled wriggling. Definitely recommended for replacing the hackneyed *Nutcracker* routine!

Horst Koegler
Stuttgart



The Doll (Alexandra Brenk), the Pilot (Erik Reisinger), the Boy (Cedric Huss), and the Jumping Jack (Katharina Erlenmeier).

Photo: Holger Schneider

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