

# Kurt Weill

Volume 29

---

Number 1

---

Spring 2011

*Newsletter*



**SINS  
(7) ON  
STAGE**

# Kurt Weill

Newsletter

Volume 29

Number 1

Spring 2011

## In this issue

---

### Feature: *The Sins on Stage*

<b>Introduction</b>	3
<b>Genesis and World Premiere, 1933</b>	5
<b>Copenhagen, 1936</b>	7
<b>New York City Ballet, 1958</b>	8
<b>Frankfurter Städtische Bühnen, 1960</b>	9
<b>After Lenya: Later Productions</b>	9

### Videos

<i>Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny</i> at the Metropolitan Opera, 1979 Rodney Milnes	13
---	----

### Books

<i>A Gambler's Instinct: The Story of Broadway Producer Cheryl Crawford</i> by Milly S. Barranger Wendy Smith	14
---	----

### Performances

<i>Knickerbocker Holiday</i> in concert in New York	16
<i>Lost in the Stars</i> in New York	18
<i>Der Protagonist</i> in Dessau Matthias Henke	20
<i>Der Silbersee</i> in Hannover Alexandra Dorothea Bönninghoff	21
<i>Die Dreigroschenoper</i> in Paris Pascal Huynh	22
<i>Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny</i> in Cologne Andreas Eichhorn	23

<i>Topical Weill</i>	1a-8a
----------------------	-------

ISSN 0899-6407

© 2011 Kurt Weill Foundation for Music

7 East 20th Street  
New York, NY 10003-1106  
tel. (212) 505-5240  
fax (212) 353-9663

Published twice a year, the Kurt Weill Newsletter features articles and reviews (books, performances, recordings) that center on Kurt Weill but take a broader look at issues of twentieth-century music and theater. With a print run of 5,000 copies, the Newsletter is distributed worldwide. Subscriptions are free. The editor welcomes the submission of articles, reviews, and news items for inclusion in future issues.

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.

### Staff

---

Elmar Juchem, *Editor*      Carolyn Weber, *Associate Editor*  
Dave Stein, *Associate Editor*      Brady Sansone, *Production*  
Kate Chisholm, *Staff Reporter*

### Kurt Weill Foundation Trustees

---

Kim Kowalke, *President*  
Philip Getter, *Senior Vice President and Treasurer*  
Guy Stern, *Vice President*  
Edward Harsh, *Secretary*

André Bishop      Walter Hinderer  
Joanne Hubbard Cossa      Welz Kauffman  
Susan Feder

*Trustees Emeriti*  
Milton Coleman      Harold Prince  
Paul Epstein      Julius Rudel

*Honorary Trustee:* Teresa Stratas

### Internet Resources

---

World Wide Web: <http://www.kwf.org>

E-mail:

Information: [kwfinfo@kwf.org](mailto:kwfinfo@kwf.org)

Weill-Lenya Research Center: [wlr@kwf.org](mailto:wlr@kwf.org)

Kurt Weill Edition: [kwe@kwf.org](mailto:kwe@kwf.org)

# The *Sins* on Stage

**This May, *The Seven Deadly Sins* returned to the New York City Ballet after an absence of more than fifty years. Initially identified with George Balanchine, the work has attracted a wide array of choreographers, directors, and designers who have attempted to put their own stamp on it. The sheer variety of approaches illustrates an essential point about *Die sieben Todsünden*: The work poses unique challenges that have inspired some of the world's leading artists.**

Excerpt from program note by David Drew for the Edinburgh Festival in 1961:

“In formulating a style which (like Stravinsky’s, in *The Soldier’s Tale*) says No to illusion and three times No to the dreamers of cut-price dreams, Brecht and Weill were not, as is sometimes suggested, giving way to disillusion. Their work is passionately moralistic, and more humane and humanitarian than any of Stravinsky’s stage-works previous to *The Rake’s Progress*. *The Seven Deadly Sins*, their last collaboration, is indeed a kind of Progress in the Hogarthian sense. The Sins it depicts are the traditional ones, reinterpreted as a caricature of bourgeois morality. Thus, ‘Sloth’ is to be slothful in making money, ‘Anger’ is to be angry about the injustices of society. As always with Brecht and Weill, the interplay of music, words and action is strictly contrapuntal (this is their greatest achievement). In order to say that the real sin is to *avoid* those attitudes of mind which are sinful in bourgeois eyes, everything is given a double meaning. The music does not express the text: it contradicts it. For instance, when the tenor in ‘Covetousness’ advises that one must hide one’s avarice, the music is in the form of a most expressive and dignified aria. It is right to be moved by the music, wrong to think it confers approval of an undignified philosophy. On the contrary, through the tension of opposites it shows that philosophy for what it is. The musical theatre has discovered the principle of dialectic.

“*The Seven Deadly Sins*, like *Renard*, involves singing roles which are both in and beyond the action. It disdains all illusion of realism, and in place of the conflict of character is put the conflict of ideas. It uses American place names as *Renard* uses the farmyard—as a backcloth against which to set in relief something much larger, something without time or locality. When the opening music returns again at the close, a ritual drama has once more turned full circle. Throughout, the Family—an almost motionless male quartet—are the ambiguous High Priests. Their satanic daughter sings seven litanies of Expediency to her sister Anna, who dances but does not utter, as if she were only a child; seven times her natural human instincts are overcome, and each stage brings the two sisters nearer the altar of worldly success, where the Family sit, waiting. There is no bloodshed in this gentle murder of a free spirit, and certainly no conventional tragedy. It is the music which first asks us to pity, and the combination of the spoken and the unspoken, the music and the dance-mime, which seeks to explain our pity. Different theatrical forms are brought together in order that they may seem to question each other. Without some such tension, any form of musical theatre, new or old, is valueless.”

## Introduction

Like its main character(s), *Die sieben Todsünden* presents a divided personality. One of the best examples of Weill’s penchant for combining genres and breaching boundaries, the *Sins* was conceived as a dance work with singing, one of several ballets that made up a brief season in the summer of 1933, choreographed by George Balanchine. It has seen successful dance and opera productions since then, but it has done the most business as a concert work with symphony orchestras. Even repertory theaters and cabaret artists frequently express interest, although it is generally impossible for them to meet the work’s musical demands.

What sort of work is the *Sins*? It is a ballet. It is a one-act opera. It is a morality play with an unusually elaborate score. It is a secular cantata. It could even be labeled an orchestral song cycle. When staged, it requires dance, pantomime, and acting. The palette of musical idioms is rich and varied within the larger framework, as Weill



Anna I (Patti LuPone) and Anna II (Wendy Whelan) in the latest production of *The Seven Deadly Sins* at the New York City Ballet, May 2011 (more on p. 12). Photo: Paul Kolnik



Tilly Losch and Lotte Lenya, Paris, 1933. Photo: Studio-Iris



Allegra Kent and Lotte Lenya, New York, 1958. Photo: Fred Fehl



Karin von Aroltingen and Lotte Lenya, Frankfurt, 1960. Photo: Jack Hochscheid

drew on such diverse models as Lutheran chorales, Weimar cabaret, Mahler, and any number of other forebears to create a dazzling mosaic of a score that impresses listeners as a powerful, coherent whole.

Another split haunts *Die sieben Todsünden*: Is it more effective on stage or in concert? As a concert work, it requires only a soprano, a male quartet, and an orchestra. Often, when stage works become popular as concert works, their life on stage ends, but that has not proven true of the *Sins*. The number of high-profile stagings in recent years leaves no doubt that it will remain in the repertory of dance and opera companies. Yet such companies typically find at least one aspect of the work difficult: ballet companies need to hire singers, and opera companies tend to minimize the dancing. Because the work is short, it must be paired with one or two other works to make up a full evening, which also adds complications, not to mention production costs.

Yet another unusual duality: the *Sins* exists in two versions. When Lenya recorded the work in 1956, she could no longer sing the original vocal line, as she had in 1933, so her solo sections had to be transposed down a fourth. (“Gluttony” was orchestrated at the same time, despite the fact that Weill’s original score called for guitar accompaniment only.) This unacknowledged arrangement, made by Wilhelm Brückner-Rüggeberg after Weill’s death, then passed for the original version, which did not make its way back into the repertory for a decade. Both the original and the transposed arrangement are “Lenya versions” (although the term usually is applied only to Brückner-Rüggeberg’s arrangement), but only the former is the “Weill version.”

Two broad performance traditions have emerged over time, which might be described as the classical and the cabaret. Classically trained singers such as Teresa Stratas, Anne Sofie von Otter, or Angelika Kirchschrager have performed the work with operatic technique and refined diction. Successful popular singers such as Gisela May, Ute Lemper, or Marianne Faithfull have done it differently, employing a rougher approach to the text and pitches along with a wide array of vocal mannerisms. Although it is generally true that opera singers use the original version and pop singers perform the transposed arrangement, some classical singers, like Julia Migenes, have preferred the lower key. On the other hand, Marianne Faithfull took on the original key, but one octave down. (In Dessau, in 2001, when Anna I was sung by a sopranoist, he sang it in the original key at original pitch.) Due to the authority of Lenya’s recording, for 25 years subsequent recordings of the *Sins* transmitted the low-voice arrangement. The original orchestration in its original keys was not recorded until 1983. Since then, most recordings have used Weill’s key, but the lower-key arrangement is still often used in performance. (For a complete discography, see the Foundation’s web site: <http://www.kwf.org/kurt-weill/weill-works/by-title/200-n4main.html>.)



Ellen Lauren (top) and Lauren Flanigan, New York, 1997. Photo: Carol Rosegg



Jörg Waschinski and Gregor Seyffert, Dessau, 2001. Photo: Jens Schlüter



Catherine Malfitano, Cincinnati, 2003. Photo: Philip Groshong

## Genesis and World Premiere: George Balanchine and Les Ballets 1933

The genesis of *Die sieben Todsünden* is rooted in two failing marriages. Producer Edward James wanted to reconcile with his wife, Tilly Losch, or perhaps just keep an eye on her. Early in 1933, when Boris Kochno and George Balanchine asked him to support a new ballet company, he jumped at the chance, provided Losch (a well-known dancer who had worked with Max Reinhardt and Charles Cochran) would be the lead dancer. This short-lived but legendary ballet project was known as Les Ballets 1933.

Weill had arrived in Paris alone in March 1933. He and Lenya had been growing apart for some time; both were involved in intense affairs and spending little time together. When James offered Weill a chance to compose a ballet that required a singer, he took it—partly because he needed the money and partly because it meant he could hire Lenya. (He also hired Lenya's lover, tenor Otto Pasetti, for the male quartet.) The strategy did not work in either case; both James and Weill wound up divorced, although Weill would remarry Lenya in 1937.

When Weill arrived in Paris, he had a commission for a symphony (and a completed first movement) but no other work lined up. A successful performance of *Der Jasager* and an expanded version of *Mahagonny Songspiel* in December 1932 had alerted the cognoscenti of Paris to his music, and the fame of *Die Dreigroschenoper* had preceded him as well. The 1932 performance had attracted the attention of the vicomte and vicomtesse de Noailles, notable art patrons, and they installed him in their Paris apartment.

### Letter from Weill to Erika Neher, 18 April 1933 (excerpt):

"Anyone who knows me even slightly is aware that a text is merely a starting point for me—that every text I've set looks entirely different once it's been swept through my music. The matter of an important collaboration with me you make dependent on the text, without bothering to think about what I have made of this text. My setting possesses a richness of invention, a majesty of expression, and a conciseness such as I have not achieved since the *Jasager*. Everyone to whom I have shown it (and they're not all idiots) was totally speechless about what I have created here. And what does Cas [designer Caspar Neher] do? He doesn't believe that a piece of mine in any case possesses sufficient qualities by itself to warrant a collaboration. He turns it down with the feeble excuse that he doesn't like the text.

"As far as the qualities of the text are concerned, I too don't believe it is immortal poetry. But it contains several elements which really suit my music (and that is decisive for me and really should be for you as well); it displays an intellectual attitude completely in control (all Frenchmen who read it—and they really aren't all idiots—compare it to *Candide* by Voltaire), it contains—as always—formulations of great individual beauty and phrases of a simple human expressiveness, which you recognize only when you hear the music I have come up with for it. After having worked with B. [Brecht] for a week I am more than ever of the opinion that he is one of the most repulsive, unpleasant characters on the face of the earth. But I am able to separate this completely from his work."

On 4 April, Weill signed a contract with the wealthy young Englishman Edward James, in which he agreed to compose a stage work of about half an hour "according to the artistic intentions of Messrs. Weill and James" and deliver the piano score within a month. James paid 30,000 francs and got three years' exclusive stage rights. Part of James's "artistic intention" was a story of divided personality, in which a single woman would be embodied by two separate actors, a singer and a dancer. That meant the work would require a text, and Weill attempted without success to recruit Jean Cocteau. Then, prodded by James, he asked his former collaborator and fellow exile Bertolt Brecht to write the script. Both had fled their homeland and needed money and work. Brecht bridled at writing a text based on another's conception and even submitted an alternate scenario that was decisively rejected, but he was soon persuaded (not least by James's payment of 10,000 francs). He and Weill began work on the text in mid-April; after little more than a week, Brecht returned to Switzerland. Weill completed the vocal score three days ahead of schedule.

But trouble lay ahead. Weill and Brecht had entered swirling waters for which their successes in Berlin had not prepared them. Part of the problem was simply resentment of foreign artists; as more and more German artists fled the Nazis and sought refuge in Paris, the French saw them as unwelcome competition. As Arthur Honegger told Maurice Abravanel, "We sit around the table, there is a cheese for all of us to share, and there is not *that* much cheese. If you add one more plate, then that means less cheese for each of us." More important was the unsettled state of the ballet world after Diaghilev's death in 1929. In France, the Russian tradition was maintained by Les Ballets de Monte Carlo, formed as a successor to Diaghilev's company. But Balanchine and Kochno, both of whom had worked under Diaghilev, left the Monte Carlo troupe in 1932 and took several young Russian dancers with them. They all signed on with James to work on Les Ballets 1933. (The resulting wrangling created legal headaches for James.) This action caused quite a stir within the French community of *balletomanes*, with stalwarts of the classic Russian tradition at odds with partisans of a newer style. Then there were the competing modern dance languages of Kurt Jooss and Mary Wigman that had recently emerged.

The season opened on 7 June at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées; a few weeks later, the company traveled to London and performed the same ballets. (*Die sieben Todsünden* was retitled *Anna-Anna* and translated into English for the British audience.) Some critics treated *Die sieben Todsünden* as no more than a travesty of ballet and a betrayal of the Russian tradition. They suggested that no true choreography (as they understood the term, at least) was involved, and they were equally put off by the extensive text, sung in German. (Other critics were sympathetic, notably composer-conductor Constant Lambert in England and Paul de Stoecklin in France; Weill's friend Darius Milhaud, who also composed for Les Ballets 1933, included favorable mention in his article on the project.) This last hurrah of the Weill-Brecht combine, including set designer Caspar Neher, Lenya, and conductor Maurice Abravanel, struck a chord neither in Paris nor in London. With the benefit of hindsight, we can also see it as the turning point in Weill's Parisian sojourn, which started so well but soon evolved into a period of frustration and missed opportunities.

**“Lenya’s sweet voice and fragile beauty . . . she sings or rather croons, with an impeccable diction that reaches to the farthest corner of any hall and with an intensity of dramatization and a sincerity of will that are very moving.”**

—Virgil Thomson, *Modern Music* (Nov.–Dec. 1933)

“Les Ballets 1933 come out of an entirely different conception and aesthetic from what we normally call ballet. Brilliant as they are, Tilly Losch’s dances have nothing to do with classical tradition or even Diaghilev’s refinements.”—Pierre Michaud, *L’opinion* (15 July 1933)

“However new and strange his steps may be, Balanchine always preserves an overall design with connecting themes. Too many choreographers nowadays simply provide a sequence of unconnected scenes, so we congratulate Balanchine for his all too rare gift. Not just his intelligence, but his sensitivity and expressive power are remarkable.”—Louis Léon-Martin, *Paris Midi* (9 June 1933)

“*Les sept péchés capitaux* suffers from a fundamental error: realism, so natural in the theater, does not suit the dance. Allegories of vice and misery cannot be effectively realized in a genre that depends on wonder, which must abandon the ugly details of daily life in order to create grace and beauty.”—Henry Bézanet, *Le parisien* (18 June 1933)

“In *Les sept péchés capitaux*, song, mime, and dance are closely bound together. Kurt Weill’s music holds the same straightforward qualities (which reflect so accurately today’s crisis) as *Mahagonny* and *L’opéra de quat’ sous*.”—Darius Milhaud, *La revue mondiale* (1 July 1933)

“The Weill-Brecht work stands out in terms of its form, since it is not so much a ballet as a short opera, completely in the style of their earlier works.”—Walter Mehring, *Das neue Tagebuch* (1 July 1933)

“[Tilly Losch] dances her way with enormous brio and suppleness through the seven deadly sins; literally *through* them, for she dives, after each new sin, through the paper panel on which it is inscribed, leaving a fascinating, if accidental, pattern in the slashed paper.”—*The New Statesman* (8 July 1933)

“*Anna-Anna* is an interesting experiment in storytelling, with, I feel, many missed opportunities. The perfect balance between singer and dancer is completely destroyed when the dancer replies verbally. It is a confession of choreographic failure, also quite unnecessary, as the motives are always unusually clear. Throughout the whole episode I felt that the balance was wrong and that choreography did not have the significance of the singing, though again Losch saves the situation. Lotte Lenja I found superb. This whole production is the type of thing that Kurt Jooss would have handled supremely well.”—Arnold Haskell, *The New English Weekly* (13 July 1933)

Very little visual record of the original production survives, but the *Dancing Times* published an unusually detailed description of the set (August 1933):

“To the right. — The façade of a doll’s house, behind which are seated the members of a male-voice quartette, dressed in homely negligée. Above them, a gigantic, unframed, photographic enlargement of the whole family in realistic untidiness.

“To the left. — Part of a dimly lit, dreary, papered parlour, complete with picture on wall, and hat peg. Access is gained by wooden steps and a swaying, rickety door. The parlour is on stilts.

“Between. — A great half-circle surrounded by arches. This might be an ambulatory with radiating chapels, or a circus with a surround of horse boxes. The doors of the chapels (or horse boxes) are covered with stretched tissue paper on which is written the name of the seven deadly sins. At times the mind ascribes the name to the horse that might be on the other side; at others the mind relates the name to some Satanic saint whose chapel is thus indicated.

“Above. — Two undisguised battens bearing huge, high-powered lights surrounded by tin reflectors. Little of the chapel about these, but much of the circus, and most of a wild-west saloon. Also, hanging from high above, seven cartoons. At first sight these look like banners, but, when the lighting improves, they are seen to be rather ugly illustrations of the sins, though even here a certain horsiness of contour is at times apparent.

“Properties. — Bentwood chairs, park seats, Woodworth jewels, jute sacks and papier-maché decapitated heads (one of which unhappily becomes, for a few dreadful moments, a football).”



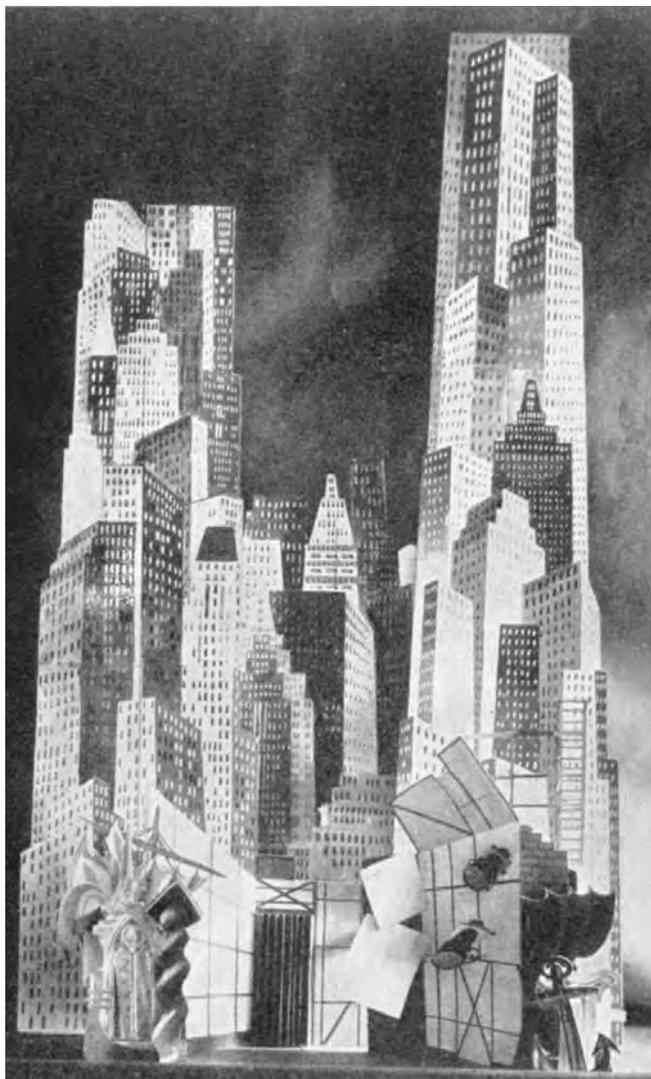
One of Caspar Neher’s “cartoons,” the banners representing the sins—in this case, Gluttony.

## Copenhagen Royal Theater, 1936, Harald Lander

On 7 June 1934, one Philip Burnham wrote to Edward James, “An acquaintance of mine, Herr Lander, of Copenhagen, has been considering the question of producing the ballet, ‘Die sieben Todsünde[n]’, in Copenhagen during the forthcoming season. . . . it would be the regular company of the Royal Theatre at Copenhagen . . .” Over two years passed before Harald Lander’s production bowed at the Royal Theater, with the delay apparently caused by difficulties in obtaining the score, creating instrumental parts, and recreating the scenario. As James wrote in frustration to a representative of the theater (8 December 1934), “I regret to hear that the Ballet Master is angry that he has no libretto; but I cannot send him what never existed. . . . as for a real libretto, there never was one. The stage directions were devised by Georges [*sic*] Balanchine during the rehearsals, and these were never written down by anybody.”

The *Sins* opened at the Royal Theater on 12 November 1936 and closed without warning after two performances. Danish scholar

Niels Krabbe has done extensive archival research in order to find out why. (An abstract of Dr. Krabbe’s article, “Kurt Weills Dødssynder i København: En tidsel i den danske urtehave,” appears below.) Beyond Krabbe’s investigation, Edward James’s correspondence reveals another possible problem: Brecht’s insistence on receiving royalties for the production. In a letter dated 15 October 1936, Karla Tvede of the Skandinavisk Teaterforlag reported to James on a meeting with Brecht during rehearsals: “He came and was very unpleasant and impolite and told us, he would not have anything to do with us as only he could make and sign a contract with the Royal Opera. We tried to argue with him and explain our letters with you and Mr. Weill, but he completely lost his self control—all in the presence of the [head of the theater]—and declared he alone was the owner and he had no interest in ‘a certain’ Mr. James who owed him much money!!! He would stop the rehearsals etc. etc. he would prosecute you, us and the whole world—a very tedious scene.”



Backdrop created for the Copenhagen set by Svend Johansen.

### Abstract:

“Kurt Weill’s *Die sieben Todsünden*: A Thistle in the Danish Kitchen Garden”

Read the full article at <http://www.nielskrabbe.dk/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/Deadly-sins-pdf1.pdf>

Nearly all the Weill-Brecht works had been performed in Denmark by 1936, beginning with *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1930), but none at the Royal Theater. Some of Brecht’s plays had also been performed, and he was living in Denmark at the time.

Many press notices anticipated the performance of *Die sieben Todsünden* starting at the beginning of November. Critics were trying to prepare audiences for what they were about to see. Even before the opening, the press was ambivalent, and there were reports of discontent among the cast. On opening night, Illona Wieselmann played Anna I, Margot Lander played Anna II, and Johan Hye-Knudsen conducted. Reviews ran the gamut from outrage to enthusiasm, with a debate arising over the musical and dramatic quality of the work as well as its politics. Several reviewers referred to a recent production of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, which had come under attack as an indecent, ultra-modern work, and that stir framed the debate over *Die sieben Todsünden*.

The *Sins* had only one more performance. In later years, two explanations for the abrupt cancellation were commonly advanced: the German ambassador lodged a protest, or the King of Denmark stormed out of a performance. Yet there was absolutely no hint of either occurrence in the press at the time. Nor is any evidence to be found in the papers of the theater manager. Further investigation has turned up two different reasons: Illona Wieselmann fell ill and was given sick leave; and the theater manager was worried about attacks on his adventurous programming from the right wing. Even though a faction urged the director to bring back the *Sins*, and the theater announced plans to do so in 1937, the work was not mounted again.

## U.S. Premiere: George Balanchine and the New York City Ballet, 1958

As Lenya began her efforts to revive Weill's work in the wake of his sudden death in 1950, one of her first recordings was a transposed arrangement of the *Sins*. The recording brought the work back into the public eye; as Horst Koegler put it: "Thanks to the recording industry, *The Seven Deadly Sins* has been discovered for the theatre. It is unlikely that it would have been seen again if it were not for the combined enterprise of famed chanteuse Lotte Lenya, her late husband George Davis, and Columbia Records . . . only then [did] George Balanchine warm up to the idea of reproducing the unusual theatre work which had figured prominently in his *Les Ballets 1933*" (*Dance Magazine*, July 1960). Balanchine's 1958 revival and the German premiere two years later put the work back on the map, soon to be followed by the stagings of Maurice Béjart and Kenneth MacMillan in 1961. Balanchine never brought this production back, despite an effort in the 1970s, and all attempts to reconstruct his choreography were unsuccessful.

"For the new version Balanchine changed just about everything but the sins and the songs. . . . [He] created the new *Seven Deadly Sins* in just over three weeks. He never knew beforehand exactly what he was going to do but, working like a jazz instrumentalist improvising on a fondly remembered old tune, made up most of the movements as he went along. In the airy practice room at the School of American Ballet he would sit by himself, absorbed, listening to Weill's music. Then he would rise, gaze at the assembled dancers and say, 'Re-ca-dy and . . . !' in his low, high-voltage voice. He showed them what he wanted them to do. The dancers tried it, grinning sometimes at the unexpected new steps. Balanchine would clap his hands twice, his signal to stop. He demonstrated again what expression of the face, what angle of the fingers, what sweep of limb he wanted. The dancers repeated, and suddenly the movements came alive, full of drama, conveying moods that swiftly changed from the tender to the sensual to the terrifying."—*Life Magazine* (22 December 1958)

"Later, Miss [Allegra] Kent, stripped to the legal minimum, is borne in on [a] cellophane-wrapped platter as the most delectable dish in the night club. Still later, she is forced by Anna I to divest herself of her finery (all is carefully deposited in a handy sack), for these are earnings, and to start again from what is literally scratch. Throughout the work, the dancer is called upon to combine mime and fetching poses with out-and-out dance and in all categories, she is enormously provocative."—**Walter Terry**, *New York Herald Tribune* (5 December 1958)



"[Balanchine] has made no effort whatever to bring [the work's] style up to date; he has rather used its obsolescence as an instrument for driving home its point. . . . Rouben Ter Arutunian has designed setting and costumes with a kind of horrible beauty about them. They are full of comment as they evoke the style of a stale era with the deliberate intent of telling an ugly story in all blandness."—**John Martin**, *New York Times* (5 December 1958)

Photos: Fred Fehl



". . . the *Seven Deadly Sins*, presented seventeen times during the winter season—only four performances had originally been planned—and now being repeated as I write in June. . . . It is, however, clearly identifiable as a classic. Which, along with its completeness—the number of arts it brings to fullest pitch in fullest coordination—is what ranks it even above what were, for me, the only two other real events of the theatre this past season, *Epitaph for George Dillon* and *A Raisin in the Sun*. . . . the hero is Rouben Ter-Arutunian, but he will be a hero a thousand times throughout this production for some of the most penetrating sets and costumes any branch of our theatre has ever known. The mode is German Expressionist and thereafter, the prime sources are Kirchner and Grosz, the work is economical, unified, exact, and of a mingled ferocity and compassion that is almost more than the heart can bear."—**Jerry Tallmer**, *Evergreen Review* (Summer 1959)

## German Premiere: Tatjana Gsovsky and Frankfurter Städtische Bühnen, 1960

“This mixed work, a combination of pantomime, music drama, and ballet, sees its ideal staging in this performance. Tatjana Gsovsky has created a transparent choreography in which every clearly-etched detail contributes to its success . . . Hein Heckroth’s sets are simple, easily moved, discreet, and therefore perfect; nothing more is needed.”—**Andreas Razumovsky**, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (8 April 1960)

Anna I (Lena) instructs Anna II (Karin von Aroldingen) in the dangers of Envy as members of the corps de ballet look on. Photo: dpa



“We notice right away that Hein Heckroth has not imitated Caspar Neher’s Paris set design, in which each sin had its own doorway for the Annas to burst through. Instead, a blackboard stands at stage right, on which Anna I writes the name of each sin in large script just before it is danced; to the left, the Family sits on a bench, and the house in Louisiana grows slowly behind them. The center of the stage is reserved for the charmingly parodic set pieces, which are lowered from above as needed. At the beginning, the two Annas emerge wrapped in a voluminous coat, so their oneness is established visually from the start.”—**Erich Seelmann-Eggebert**, *Stuttgarter Nachricht* (11 April 1960)

“Will the Frankfurt production give the work new life on stage? It has a number of qualities that could make it a model for future productions and light the way to new stagings, even if a few of its attributes are unique and inimitable.”—**Hugo Puetter**, *Frankfurter Neue Presse* (8 April 1960)

## After Lenya: Later Productions

### Brussels, 1961, Maurice Béjart

“Béjart and his designer, Rudolf Kufner, evoked the Berlin of the Twenties in staging the work as a series of ‘morality-emblems,’ allegorical pictures with moralistic inscriptions popular in the Renaissance and Baroque periods. . . . Each of Béjart’s scenes began and ended in a photographic freeze; *Die sieben Todsünden* became thereby almost a ballet-ballad, taking its cue from the ‘Moritat’ that opens *Die Dreigroschenoper*. Although I found Ursula Kübler too ‘cultivated’ a singer for Anna I, Janine Charrat, well-known as a choreographer, was sensational as Anna II. In moth-green taffeta, her hair like a ginger mop above her night-shadowed eyes, Charrat danced the role as if she were just another piece of merchandise to reveal the disparity between her bourgeois longings and her resignation to the rules of the marketplace. Whatever she pretended to be, she always remained the exploited and miserable creature who would have much preferred to stay with her family back in Louisiana—or in her Berlin tenement, for that matter.”—**Horst Koegler**, *Kurt Weill Newsletter* (Fall 1985)

### Covent Garden, 1973, Kenneth MacMillan

“Kenneth MacMillan’s new production of *The Seven Deadly Sins* looks like a colossal in-joke . . . everyone looking like transvestites whether they are or not—camp ‘with a capital K’. Infatuated with the corruption it affects to deplore (like such movies as *The Damned* and *Cabaret*), it robs Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill’s cynical morality play of all its bitterness and poignancy. Busy choreography competes with busy décor—most of the time you can’t even see what’s going on, let alone follow the story. Ian Spurling’s [set] designs are heavily imitative of Edward Burra, but not half so good. Derek Rencher as always manages to preserve a certain dignity, [dancer Michael] Coleman contributes a virtuoso bit, and Jennifer Penney is coltishly leggy and vulnerable as the dancing Anna. As the singing Anna, Georgia Brown is fatally handicapped by the decision to use a German accent.”—**David Vaughan**, *Dancing Times* (August 1973)

Note: MacMillan essayed the *Sins* three times, first at the Edinburgh Festival in 1961 and finally in a video adaptation in 1984.

## Wuppertaler Tanztheater, 1976 (also Brooklyn, 1985), Pina Bausch

“If [Bausch] can stage a feminist critique of such giant cultural objects as Brecht and Weill, there’s a lesson to be drawn, perhaps even a model to be derived, for our own theatre. . . . Bausch takes Anna out of the realm of metaphor. Neither words nor music had to be changed; Bausch simply created a different scenario from them than did earlier choreographers. . . . I went to the famous 1958 Balanchine staging, but remember only the sight of Lotte Lenya as Anna I dominating Allegra Kent’s Anna II like the Wicked Witch of the West breaking Bambi to the leash—very anti-Mom, very ’50s. . . . Anna I is in a career-girl suit, severe, mean, and too smart not to feel qualms about what she’s doing; Anna II, more softly dressed, is first dippy and radiant, then rebellious, enraged, vengeful, beaten. They are neither twins nor mother and daughter, but separate selves. Almost every gesture tends toward violence. Almost everyone on stage is fearsome, threatening, controlling; in groups they’re horrifying.”—Erika Munk, *Village Voice* (5 November 1985)



Anna I (Ann Höling) and Anna II (Josephine Endicott), Wuppertal, 1976. Photo: Ulli Weiss

“‘I don’t ever ask myself if what I’m doing is theatre or dance,’ Miss Bausch said . . . ‘I started out as a dancer, yet when I first began choreographing, I never thought of it as choreography but as expressing feelings. . . . In the work, everything belongs to everything else—the music, the set, the movement and whatever is said.’”—Stephen Holden, *New York Times* (29 September 1985)

Photos: below left: Károly Matz; below right: Johan Jacobs

### Budapest, 1987, Dezso Szilágyi



“Anna I moves her pretty and talented ballerina sister, Anna II, a puppet. . . . While puppet-Anna II sacrifices herself and follows the path compelled on her, her motivator, live Anna I also turns into a puppet, losing her human personality.”—Program note

### Brussels, 1996, Sabine Hartmannshenn

“Bettina Neuhaus had provided a set of two receding walls between which Anja Silja’s Anna I controls the action and through which, at appropriate moments, bright-red gloved hands appear to scatter money or make lascivious passes at poor put-upon Anna II. . . . Hartmannshenn’s production further confused the issue by making Anna I a decidedly unsympathetic, almost sadistic, manipulator of her sister/alter ego and, at the end, by revealing the unfortunate Anna II framed in the doorway to the now completed Louisiana house in her coffin.”—John McCann, *Opera* (January 1997)



## New York City Opera, 1997, Anne Bogart

“This was a high-voltage production with a comic-strip look: Director Anne Bogart kept everyone constantly in motion, and costume designer James Schuette saturated the eye with Dick Tracy yellows, greens and magentas. [Lauren] Flanigan, who could sing with a snarl when needed, looked surprisingly nimble amid a stageful of dancers, and often carried the show. (Literally, in one case: How many opera singers can march onstage with their co-star slung over one shoulder?)”—Justin Davidson, *Newsday* (17 March 1997)



Photos: top left: Carol Rosegg; top right: Icare; bottom left: Jens Schlüter; bottom right: Clive Barda

## Kurt Weill Fest Dessau, 2001, Dietmar Seyffert



“From the very beginning, when [Anna I and Anna II] appear like Siamese twins wrapped in a cloak, their journey through the big cities develops into a paradox of continued shedding; with each layer of clothing an illusion is also lost. In Gregor Seyffert’s case, the accumulation of experience manifests itself in a gradual silencing of his eloquent body language, starting out with playful naive enthusiasm but being slowly paralyzed in the course of the drill. . . . The fact that this production will hardly find adherents is due to its singular [all-male] cast. But there is no doubt that this production will become part of Weill performance history.”—Andreas Hillger, *Mitteldeutsche Zeitung* (10 March 2001)

## Opéra de Paris, 2001, Laura Scozzi



“Laura Scozzi has created a frenetic, acrobatic choreography that is overly repetitive. Chantal Thomas’s sets are wonderful, evoking the U.S. in the 1970s. But Laurent Pelly makes use of these elements only for a superficial staging; he is more interested in cheap comedy than in plumbing the depths. . . . Anne Sofie von Otter becomes the heroine with her passionate performance, breaking out of her reserve and creating a striking persona, devoid of nostalgia but not humor.”—*Les Echos* (3 December 2001)

## Opera North, 2004, David Pountney

“The sleaze factor was much higher in David Pountney’s no-holds-barred interpretation of Weill’s *Seven Deadly Sins*, given in a mildly trendy translation by Michael Feingold. . . . On the surface, the satire was all-American and vicious indeed, centred on white trash with bestial appetites. . . . Pountney’s overweight hillbillies offered every excuse for the two Annas to take a gap year among the bright lights. But by the time we had been treated to striptease, a spar in the boxing-ring, assorted sordid agents and voyeurs, gratuitous violence and gross gluttony, parody had long since dissipated into something far more sinister.”—Martin Dreyer, *Opera* (August 2004)



## Cincinnati Opera, 2003, Nicholas Muni

"In what is believed to be a first, Malfitano performed both the singing and dancing parts in Weill's 1933 *Seven Deadly Sins*. . . . A complete artist, Malfitano's sizzling split personality of chanteuse and dancer were seamless in the Annas' seven-year odyssey across America in pursuit of the American dream.

"Set in the present, the sky rained money and each cardinal sin (cleverly announced in the 'mirror') was saturated in cartoon color. Malfitano, who took Polaroids of her journey, projected a firm, if not quite cabaret-style voice, effortlessly projecting the Annas' youthful *joie de vivre*.

"Muni's staging of this cynical morality play was a creative knockout. The Family (Dean Peterson, Andreas Conrad, Mark Panuccio and Craig Verm) was introduced in 'Sloth' as Mount

Rushmore (voices of ages past!). Their mock-serious quartets were hilarious, whether appearing as presidents, pop icons or watching the famous Anna on TV. (How does one get a tenor to sing in a diaper and pacifier?)

"In 'Wrath' in Los Angeles, Anna stops the Rodney King incident, with four cops beating a cardboard 'body.' In 'Greed,' Anna is on the big screen—in the tabloids, in the news and in commercials (P&G's Swiffer ad got a big laugh).

"Choreography by Lucinda Childs, who has collaborated with artists such as Philip Glass and John Adams, was fluid and arresting, whether Malfitano was bumping and grinding in a sleazy Memphis nightclub or twirling a little tap dance with her suitcase."—Janelle Gelfand, *Cincinnati Enquirer* (28 June 2003)

## New York City Ballet, 2011, Lynne Taylor-Corbett

Choreographer Lynne Taylor-Corbett answered some questions about her production at the New York City Ballet in May 2011. Interview by Kate Chisholm.

**How did you initially approach the choreography, and did that change over time?**

We did start working *en pointe*, and took it off *pointe* right away. I started with less because I felt I understood the story very deeply, and I let that guide me. They are very good dancers. They are trained ballet dancers; they do not study modern dance. They can move in a contemporary way, certainly, but there's a band of width in which you feel like you can make them look good and create something that's good for them and good for yourself. Karin [von Aroldingen] told me that in the version she did [in Frankfurt, 1960] there wasn't very much dancing. And she said that about the Balanchine, too—she said it was a lot of gesture, and some dance. It's very interesting because you could go either way with it. I had a colleague come to see it very early in the process, and he said, "Maybe there's a bit too much dance." So I started simplifying those parts. It's trying to find the balance so people can see what they're hearing, but not see more than they're hearing. Because of the length, if you don't nail it, if you're not there the minute you're meant to be there, there's no time to figure it out, it just goes "phht."

**Would you say it's a hard piece to stage?**

I do think it's hard. Having seen versions that left me emotionally detached, I wondered, "Why am I not caring about these women?"

Sometimes it's because the choice is for the singer to be out of the piece, more as a commentator on the side. But I wanted to try to put them both in the piece because they're one person and they both have a role in the action. Patti [LuPone] really wanted that, too: Anna I is not a commentator, she is a participant.

**Do you think *The Seven Deadly Sins* requires a set?**

I've seen it with nothing. But a deeply abstract version of it, sort of like what Pina [Bausch] has done or Anna Sokolow—I'm not sure that people would recognize it as quickly as those things go by. People are so used to television. So we made a conscious choice to use dead simple [elements]. The cities are so located in the piece; it's so episodic that way, that we made the choice to support it. It's also a massive stage. Things get swallowed on that stage.

**And the finished house at the end—were you thinking "McMansion" when you designed that?**

Yes, I was. I said to the designer, be sure it blots out the moon. Because that's the beautiful image in the beginning about the moon over the Mississippi, and you can just barely see the moon by the end, it's sort of blocked out by the house. And the image of [Anna II] just being swept away and nobody even noticing. [Anna I] doesn't even notice that that part of herself has died away.



Anna II (Wendy Whelan) conquers her pride, observed closely by Anna I (Patti LuPone).

Photo: Paul Kolnik

## Videos

### *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*

Metropolitan Opera, 1979

James Levine, conductor

John Dexter, director

Brian Large, video director

*The Metropolitan Opera*  
811357013359

This DVD release of *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* is in celebration, welcome and well-deserved, of James Levine's forty years at the Met. But even more than that, it marks an important staging post in the work's performance history.

For me there are two other memorable staging posts. First, the British premiere at Sadler's Wells in 1963, conducted by the young Colin Davis and in the same English translation by David Drew and Michael Geliot as is used here—I can still see certain scenes in my mind's eye and feel the overwhelming impact that the work made. Then there was Salzburg in 1998, when a giant picture of Weill adorned the front of the Grosses Festspielhaus, which would never have happened in the Karajan era. The belated arrival of a major 20th-century composer in the heartland of European music certainly warmed the heart. It was just a shame that the production, despite a starry cast, was in no way memorable.

And now this absolutely marvelous Met premiere from 1979, which has blown me sideways. In a booklet interview Levine says it could be argued that the Met is too big for the work, as indeed it could, but one of the many remarkable features of the recording is the way the score audibly fills the imagined space, not least thanks to the powerful projection by the whole cast, in speech as well as song. Those were the days when singers sang words, which is not always the case now. Maybe some of the principals were aware of the size problem, and sang too forcefully, but I am not complaining.

Levine's pacing and tempos are adroitly judged. Some of his more measured speeds test the soloists, but they are not found wanting. The orchestra, again, fills the space, but Levine always ensures clarity of

texture. The little flute countermelody, for example, in the *Freischütz* parody comes across clear as a bell, to entrancing effect. And more than most, Levine emphasizes the lyricism of so much of the score, poisonous lyricism maybe, but lyricism still. His is a truly magisterial reading.

John Dexter's production is simpler, more direct than Geliot's in 1963, and admirably faithful to the stage directions. Brian Large's quietly efficient filming is just as direct, never drawing attention to itself. Jocelyn Herbert's timeless designs, especially her costumes, reinforce the view that Mahagonny is in no sense just a *Zeitoper*. It has as much to say to us today as it did to the Germany of 1930, which induces something of a shudder. Have we really changed so little?

The cast is as near ideal as makes no matter. Teresa Stratas is a great Weill singer and an electrifying stage animal. For me her Jenny is definitive, and my idea of heaven would be to have her "Havana Song" on a film loop. As Begbick, that great Wagnerian Astrid Varnay paints a terrifying portrait of adamant malevolence, richly detailed in both action and reaction. It is possible to imagine the role being more lyrically sung, as by Gisela Litz on the Brückner-Rüggeberg recording, but the total effect disarms any doubts.

Richard Cassilly's Jimmy is almost too good. Of course, as one of the great *Heldentenors*—I recall his London portrayals of Tannhäuser vividly—he sings magnificently, but he presents a palpably heroic character, and the electricity generated between him and Stratas would doubtless upset that father of *Verfremdung*, Bertolt Brecht. You really care about the pair of them, and you are not supposed to.

Cornell MacNeil's Trinity Moses is not just a thug, he's a sly, baleful, manipulative thug, nicely complemented by the Fatty of Ragnar Ulfung, another natural creature of the stage. Arturo Sergi makes a charming Jacob Schmidt, but it would be good to have a more lyrical, steadier baritone than Vern Shinall as Billy, a crucial character in that he represents, I suppose, the audience. I wish there were space to name all six of the Girls of Mahagonny, whose contribution in terms of tuning and timbre is absolutely vital, and they are brilliant, as is the male chorus.

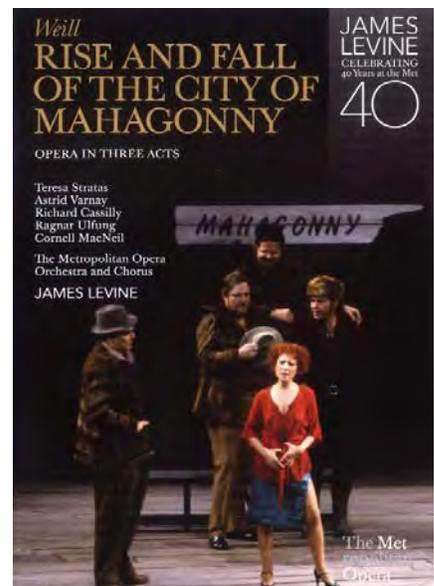
In this live performance there is, quite rightly, a lot of audience laughter, which turns nervous at Jenny's line, "The things us girls are asked to do," in the second-act finale. The "four minute-warning" (laugh-

ter) of the hurricane is not in Brecht's libretto, but it's a good insertion. And of course Begbick's "Spit out your chewing gum now" gets a really good laugh.

Final notes on the text: the third verse of the "Alabama Song" seems to have gone forever, no great loss except for those who can't get enough of one of Weill's great tunes. The "Crane Duet" is included at the end of the brothel scene, where it simply doesn't fit, any more than it does in the third act—it holds up the action just where it doesn't need to be held up. It's not great Weill, and perhaps should also be lost forever. But we can rejoice that this great historical performance is not lost forever.

**Rodney Milnes**  
London

**Note:** *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* is currently available only as part of a boxed set of twelve performances, but the Metropolitan Opera Guild plans a release of individual items from the set in the future.



## Books

---

### *A Gambler's Instinct: The Story of Broadway Producer Cheryl Crawford*

Milly S. Barranger

Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010, 243 pp.  
ISBN: 978-0-8093-2958-8

Cheryl Crawford devoted her life to the theater. She was a founding member of two pioneering organizations, the Group Theatre and the Actors Studio, which nurtured ambitious playwrights and revolutionized American acting. As an independent commercial producer, she presented some of Broadway's most adventurous musicals, including Kurt Weill's *One Touch of Venus* and *Love Life*, and no fewer than four plays by her friend Tennessee Williams, discovered by the Group in 1938. In 1986, she was on her way to auditions for a new play by a young dramatist when she suffered the accidental fall that led to her death. Crawford passionately believed that theater should be more than "gags and sugarstick romance," and she believed there was "an audience, a big one!" for "something richer, truer, deeper" (p. 113). Yet she never managed to escape the constraints of the Broadway marketplace to establish the lasting institutional theater she sought. Her story is not just the odyssey of one remarkable woman, but a chronicle of twentieth-century American theater, in all its glory and with all its flaws.

With that in mind, I must regretfully judge Milly S. Barranger's well-intentioned biography a disappointment. Barranger is professor emerita of dramatic art at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a former producing director of the university's PlayMakers Repertory Company, and the author of two books: *Unfriendly Witnesses: Gender, Theater, and Film in the McCarthy Era* and *Margaret Webster: A Life in Theater*. She certainly has the credentials for this biography, and she conscientiously conveys the particulars of Crawford's life, though there are a substantial number of minor but disconcerting errors in dates and names. More seriously, Barranger's emphases are odd and her fundamental judgments skewed, beginning with the title. All theatrical producers are in some sense gamblers, and Crawford's fondness for poker hardly made her unusual among her Broadway peers. But Crawford didn't gamble in the theater; she took calculated risks on plays she believed in. She was a hard-headed idealist, always patronized and frustrated by her more "artistic," less pragmatic partners. The conflict between their shared dreams and the hard realities she was more willing to accommodate led on several occasions to crises that shaped not only Crawford's career but the direction of the American theater.

The author's basic problem, I think, shows up in her preface. "Crawford's life story presents a conundrum to biographers interested in issues of gender and sexuality," Barranger writes, regretting that, "she downplayed her private existence in favor of the pro-

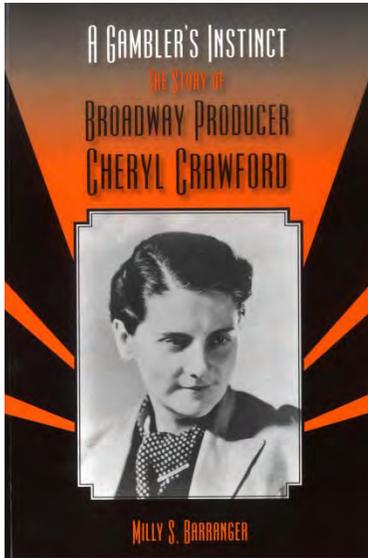
ducer's life" (p. xii). The author would clearly like to see what she insists on calling Crawford's "lesbian lifestyle" (p. 79) as central to her professional as well as her personal identity. I am unconvinced of the significance Barranger finds in Crawford's public reticence, perfectly ordinary in the mid-twentieth century, about her sexual orientation (a more appropriate term than "lifestyle"). Furthermore, as her biographer admits, she never concealed it in the more open-minded show business world where she made her life.

I am also unpersuaded that "male chauvinism" (p. 95) was a reason that Crawford, Margaret Webster, and Eva Le Gallienne failed to win financial concessions from the musicians' and stagehands' unions when they launched the American Repertory Theatre in 1945. Earlier that year, Crawford had convinced the musicians' union to create the entirely new category of "play with music" (p. 87) for *The Tempest*, directed by Webster and designed by Le Gallienne. A likelier reason for Crawford's failure to get a similar break this time was that, as Barranger herself notes, "she steered the A.R.T. away from a tax exempt, nonprofit status and toward Broadway contracts and ticket prices" (p. 89). Why should the unions ask their members to work at reduced rates when A.R.T. planned to charge full price? Crawford's inability to conceive of a noncommercial structure for a theater with noncommercial goals is a far more important problem in her career, and in the development of the American theater, than the sexism she unquestionably encountered.

In short, "issues of gender and sexuality" are peripheral to Crawford's more central difficulties, both professional and personal. Webster and Le Gallienne were women and lesbians, like Crawford, but they treated her in the mid-1940s exactly the same way her heterosexual male partners in the Group Theatre, Harold Clurman and Lee Strasberg, had in the 1930s: they made the artistic decisions and left the thankless business tasks to her. She wanted to do more—indeed, she left the Theatre Guild, where she was being groomed for a prominent executive position, to join the Group in 1931 because she hoped to direct—but she did not have the self-confidence to avoid being relegated to a subordinate role. "I am not *strong* enough to work with partners" (p. 100), she acknowledged when she resigned from A.R.T. in 1947.

The facts collected in Barranger's biography suggest that she was most fulfilled as an independent producer, shrewdly assembling teams of artists to bring to life plays and musicals whose creation she had often initiated. The three shows she worked on with Weill are emblematic. *Johnny Johnson*, though presented by the Group, was Crawford's baby. Hearing that the newly arrived German refugee was eager to compose a work on an American subject, she put Weill together with playwright Paul Green, "the most American writer she knew" (p. 51), and the trio came up with the idea of an antiwar musical done in an unconventional form mingling vaudeville, fantasy and farce. The 1936 production flopped, but discerning critics admired its unique style, and Weill became a great admirer of Crawford.

*One Touch of Venus* in 1943 was Crawford's second post-Group success. (Her first was the 1942 revival that established *Porgy and Bess* as an American classic.) Learning that Weill was "playing around" with music based on a novella about a statue of the goddess accidentally brought to life, she seized on the idea as a vehicle "that promised social meaning and musical entertainment" (p. 69). (Throughout her career, she strove to present significant work that was accessible to the average theatergoer.) She hired *New Yorker* writer S.J. Perelman for the book, light versifier Ogden Nash for the



lyrics, Agnes de Mille to choreograph, and fellow Group Theatre veteran Elia Kazan as director. Kazan's guidance helped Mary Martin, not an obvious choice for *Venus* with her Texas accent and lean physique, movingly incarnate the goddess of love.

Kazan and Bobby Lewis, also from the Group, were Crawford's preferred directors; Lewis's delicate staging of *Brigadoon* justified her hunch that this charming fantasy was not too offbeat for Broadway and gave Crawford another hit in 1947. That same year, the three old comrades founded the Actors Studio. Despite her difficult experiences with both the Group and A.R.T., Crawford still believed that theater should be more than mindless diversion and that actors needed to be trained in a unified technique, as Lee Strasberg had done within the Group. The Actors Studio, designed as a workshop where actors employed in the commercial theater could refine their craft, seemed a sensible way to nurture serious artistic intentions on Broadway without fundamentally challenging its financial setup. In October 1947—with Crawford, as usual, handling the administrative end—Kazan and Lewis began teaching an eager group of astonishing talents that included Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift, Anne Jackson, Karl Malden, Patricia Neal, Maureen Stapleton, Eli Wallach, and Julie Harris.

Meanwhile, the multitasking Crawford was preparing another production. Alan Lerner, lyricist and bookwriter for *Brigadoon*, had an idea for a musical about the history of marriage, just the sort of unconventional material Crawford loved. She introduced Lerner to Weill, and *Love Life* began to take shape. She asked Bobby Lewis to direct, but he had reservations about the script and, taking the advice of his friend Kazan, turned down the project. Crawford then offered the show to Kazan, who accepted. Furious and feeling betrayed, Lewis resigned from the Actors Studio. Years earlier, the Group Theatre actors had sardonically noted Crawford's tendency to fling herself at immediate problems without considering bigger questions, and in this case her focus on her needs as a producer had major ramifications for the Studio. She and Kazan were unable to persuade Lee Strasberg to take Lewis's place until they agreed to make him the Studio's artistic director. Under his leadership, it would rise to world fame as the temple of Strasberg's Method, a far more narrowly focused approach to acting than the Studio's original founders had intended.

Weill was not happy with Kazan as the director of *Love Life*, which opened in October 1948 to respectful reviews but unenthu-

siastic audiences; the composer felt Kazan had no ear for music, and he lacked Lewis's imaginative touch. Crawford remained proud of the show, remarking in later years that it was a concept musical well ahead of its time, an obvious influence on such innovative productions as *Cabaret*, *Company*, *A Chorus Line*, and *Chicago*. Crawford herself continued to expand the boundaries of musical theater with *Regina*, Marc Blitzstein's musical version of *The Little Foxes* (now frequently revived as an opera); *Flahooley*, a politically tinged fantasy from the *Finian's Rainbow* team; *Reuben Reuben*, another semi-operatic work from Blitzstein; and *Trouble in Tahiti*, Leonard Bernstein's effort to write a flat-out opera on a contemporary subject. (Barranger mentions *Tahiti* only in passing and *Reuben* not at all.) More than straight plays, musicals gave Crawford a chance to participate on the creative side of productions, not just the financial side.

Yet in the '50s and '60s her efforts shifted primarily to drama, sparked by her happy work on four plays by Tennessee Williams (*The Rose Tattoo*, *Camino Real*, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, and *Period of Adjustment*), and by the Actors Studio's foray into production, an ultimately disastrous venture that once again left Crawford stuck with executing decisions she disagreed with, made by people who were supposed to be her partners but failed to take her advice—because, after all, she was just an administrator. Looking back on the experience in her autobiography, *One Naked Individual*, Crawford wrote, "I did not assert enough of the expertise my long practical experience had given me" (*One Naked Individual* [Bobbs-Merrill, 1977], p. 241).

This was always Crawford's problem when she joined a group hoping, as she did throughout her life, to create a theater with a coherent program, not just an assemblage of productions that triumphed or flopped one by one. The failure was not simply due to her for not asserting herself, or to her collaborators for not listening. It was the structural failure of an American theater operating entirely within a commercial framework: plays were financed individually by investors looking for a profit; critics reviewed them as isolated events, rather than expressions of a theatrical organization's mission; and theatergoers bought tickets accordingly. The saner alternative that began to emerge in the 1960s, as regional and non-profit theaters developed subscription audiences to support entire seasons, would have provided a more nurturing environment for Crawford, and indeed her final hit was a bittersweet play she saw at the Chelsea Theater Center in Brooklyn and quickly brought to Broadway in 1975: *Yentl*. But by then her health was poor and her finances ruined by the embezzlements of a man who had been her assistant for 12 years. Broadway had been her battleground, and although she won many battles to present innovative work that was entertaining in the deepest sense, she couldn't win the war to give such work a solid institutional foundation. American theater artists are still engaged in that struggle.

I wish that Barranger took more interest in this issue, which shaped Crawford's life from beginning to end. Instead, she gives us a capable chronicle of an estimable career and an affectionate portrait of "the legendary woman with the stern expression, bright blue eyes, and laconic wit" (p. xv). It's nice, but it's not enough. Cheryl Crawford, known for her searching analysis of scripts and her insistence that they be meaningful as well as enjoyable, would have demanded more.

**Wendy Smith**  
Brooklyn, N.Y.

## Performances

### *Knickerbocker Holiday*

*The Collegiate Chorale*  
New York

25–26 January 2011

#### What the critics thought:

“Glenn Beck endorsed *Spider-Man: Turn off the Dark* last week, but if he caught *Knickerbocker Holiday* Tuesday night at Alice Tully Hall, he’d likely be singing his praises for the libertarian ideals expressed in this rarely-seen 1938 musical. . . . Presented as a concert production by The Collegiate Chorale, which performs with vigorous sweetness, the musical’s farcical excesses have been pared back. . . . Weill’s marvelous score and striking orchestrations are richly rendered by the American Symphony Orchestra under conductor James Bagwell. Director Ted Sperling’s bare-bones staging and designer Frances Aronson’s lighting nicely frame the music-making. . . . Sporting no peg-leg but making the bittersweet most of ‘September Song,’ a formally-attired Victor Garber smoothly depicts the pragmatic Stuyvesant as an urbane dictator. A sturdy Ben Davis handsomely lends a dark baritone voice to the role of Brom and Kelli O’Hara is all quicksilver girlishness as Tina. . . . Back in 1938, Anderson’s goodhearted satire was aimed chiefly at Roosevelt and the New



James Bagwell conducts The Collegiate Chorale with the American Symphony Orchestra. Photo: Erin Baiano

Deal. It’s striking to note how his musical’s freedom-loving message certainly can apply to all sorts of people and policies currently in the news today.”—**Michael Sommers**, *New Jersey Newsroom* (26 January 2011)

“Here the book has been substantially shortened because the emphasis is on musical values—the splendid choral writing and the rich orchestrations, elegantly performed by the American Symphony Orchestra under James Bagwell. Victor Garber . . . is suitably crusty but manages to be very moving when he tries to woo the young woman with ‘September Song.’ The young woman is Kelli O’Hara, who is at her most winning and her most vocally stunning in this role. Her duet of ‘It Never Was You’ with Ben Davis was just magnificent.

. . . David Garrison is marvelous as O’Hara’s wily father . . . Christopher Fitzgerald is funny as Davis’s sidekick and Bryce Pinkham hits just the right tone as Washington Irving.”—**Howard Kissel**, *The Huffington Post* (26 January 2011)

“Much of the breezy score . . . effervesces like a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. To hear it vibrantly performed by the Collegiate Chorale and the American Symphony Orchestra . . . was to be returned to a quaint, lilting musical-theater ethos in which frivolity trumps gravity. . . . The show’s contemporary echoes were unmistakable on Tuesday evening in the first of the concert’s two performances. Remarks about debt, undercover arms sales (to American Indian tribes) and the role of government drew titters of recognition, as



Washington Irving (Bryce Pinkham, left) and Brom Broeck (Ben Davis) sing “How Can You Tell an American?”  
Photo: Erin Baiano



Brom (Ben Davis) and Tina (Kelli O’Hara) tell Tienhoven (David Garrison) they want to marry; Tenpin (Christopher Fitzgerald) looks on. Photo: Erin Baiano



Stuvesant (Victor Garber) woos Tina (Kelli O’Hara) with the wistful “September Song.” Photo: Erin Baiano



Stuyvesant (Victor Garber) saves Brom (Ben Davis) from the noose and greets his new subjects. Photo: Erin Baiano

did a reference to Flushing as a distant outpost.”—**Stephen Holden**, *New York Times* (26 January 2011)

“[Weill’s] score is a fascinating mixture of operetta choruses, peppy vaudeville turns, gorgeous Broadway ballads, and Germanic-flavored strains, all orchestrated brilliantly by the composer himself. . . . If he [Garber] lacks [Walter] Huston’s rapsallion charms, he smartly compensates by playing to his own strengths, delivering a steely, suave, impeccably cultured Stuyvesant with a tantalizing darkness in his soul. . . . Davis gives a rough-hewn, aw-shucks performance that’s pretty nigh perfect, while his singing is impeccably phrased and equally at home in the varied styles. When Davis and Kelli O’Hara, overqualified but delightful in the undemanding role of Tina, soar together on ‘It Never Was You,’ well, that’s pretty much my definition of nirvana. . . . James Bagwell conducts with clarity and precision, though at times his work can feel a tad square—this was a raucous musical comedy, after all. The Collegiate Chorale makes beautiful sounds as it stands in for the merry villagers.”—**Erik Haagensen**, *Back Stage* (26 January 2011)

“Musically it was top-notch: the depth and detail of Weill’s eclectic score got full value, a plus for the promised recording. In the house, however, very harsh miking impeded one’s enjoyment. . . . Ben Davis’s Broeck had the model looks of the ‘30s *jeune premier* without, alas, the voice: he sounded grainy and blended badly with the excellent Kelli O’Hara, Broadway’s current lyric soprano star, playing Tina. . . . As the spirited tyrant we had Victor Garber, a genuine star presence but here seeming too debonair, wanting the implicit sense of danger and also craggy humanism. He put over the hit ‘September Song’ with good phrasing, but remained too score-bound in subsequent numbers.”—**David Shengold**, *Opera* (May 2011)

“There’s a bounty of riches to be found in this show. And whether they occur in the songs and the dialogue, they’re not always sweet—sometimes, in fact, they’re biting enough to make you reconsider what passes for subversive political theatre today. . . . Sperling and Barnes have made a solid case for the score as an underrated classic, even by Weill’s own sumptuous standards. . . . This deceptively silvery show . . . contains some of Weill and Anderson’s most distinctive work for the popular American stage.”—**Matthew Murray**, *Talkin’ Broadway* (26 January 2011)

“[*Knickerbocker Holiday*] was a Republican satire on Roosevelt and the New Deal, most of which, however timely today, was lacking from the concert version written by Ted Sperling and Edward Barnes, and directed by the former. Nevertheless, the orchestra and chorus performed compellingly, and only the characters of the defanged satire, mostly turned into farce figures, fared poorly. The heavy Dutch accent of the councilors clashed with the all-American English of Stuyvesant, though that was the least of Victor Garber’s unvirile personation. . . . As the lovers, Ben Davis and Kelli O’Hara did all right by the indestructible ‘It Never Was You,’ but, afterwards, neither O’Hara, an overdecorated veteran ingénue, nor Davis, a blandly colorless Brom, managed to prove much beyond that two sticks rubbed together require more than a couple of hours to strike a spark. . . . How bloodlessly Garber rendered, with his fussy but desiccated approach, such a superb number as ‘September Song,’ which only the *Times* reviewer managed to compare to Huston’s, and only his mother could love.”—**John Simon**, *Uncensored John Simon* (8 February 2011)

“Weill’s work is vibrantly refreshing, an intriguing mix of his familiar Berlin style with his first explorations of the American musical. Anderson, though, had no musical experience, and his lack of practical craft shows: More than a few of the 26 songs in *Knickerbocker* are repetitive or extraneous. The Collegiate Chorale has given *Knickerbocker* a fine mounting, musically; James Bagwell takes his 27-piece orchestra through Weill’s original orchestrations, supplemented by a huge chorus of 68. (Weill had 13 singers.) The book has been whittled down, and happily so, but we still get all those repetitive songs. But whatever the weaknesses might be, it’s still a worthwhile pleasure to hear the score in all its musical splendor.”—**Steven Suskin**, *Variety* (26 January 2011)

“James Bagwell led his eager Chorale and the American Symphony Orchestra with sympathetic verve. Ted Sperling staged the diversions simply and the cast, performing in modern mufti with scores in hand, represented an ensemble of indomitable pros. Stuyvesant was to have been George Hearn, Sweeney Todd *par excellence*, but he abandoned the project to play Van Helsing in a fast-flopping *Dracula* musical. In his place came the trusty Victor Garber, who exuded crisp authority and croaked the big song deftly. . . . Only one major problem marred the proceedings: edgy, ugly and possibly unnecessary amplification. Did I say amplification? Call it distortion.”—**Martin Bernheimer**, *Financial Times* (28 January 2011)



The Dutch Council debates the merits of hanging Brom (Ben Davis) in “No, Ve Wouldn’t Gonto Do It.” Photo: Erin Baiano

## Performances

### *Lost in the Stars*

*New York City Center Encores!*

3–6 February 2011

#### What the critics thought:

“Compared to many of today’s musicals, *Lost in the Stars* is a masterpiece of articulate eloquence and solid structure that actually sidesteps obvious clichés. . . . The point of the show isn’t to question individual faults, but how apartheid poisoned people. And the point of this revival is the music—evocative, lush and downright brilliant at times. The repeated use of choral singing creates haunting effects, and Weill’s original orchestrations alone are so intricate that you’d need a repeat visit to fully appreciate them. . . . *Lost in the Stars* may have a somber message, but when this kind of magic happens onstage, all feels right with the world—of theater, at least.”—**Elisabeth Vincentelli, *New York Post* (5 February 2011)**



The Rev. Stephen Kumalo (Chuck Cooper) and his wife, Grace (Sharon Washington). Photo: Joan Marcus

“Surging with thrilling choral passages, often driven by locomotive rhythms and punctuated by lyrical ballads like ‘Stay Well,’ Weill’s final completed score is remarkable in its fusion of musical theater styles. Staged swiftly by Gary Griffin in an animated oratorio-type format upon steps surrounding musical director Rob Berman’s keen 12-member orchestra . . . this production keeps the music foremost. Garbed in South African street clothes by



The Leader (Quentin Earl Darrington) and the Chorus introduce the setting in “The Hills of Ixopo.” Photo: Joan Marcus

Paul Tazewell and led by a dynamic Quentin Earl Darrington, the chorus members blend their voices into powerful resonance. Chuck Cooper is formidable in the demanding lead role of a back country preacher whose son commits murder in the city. Grave yet kindly in manner, Cooper sings with warm, mellifluous strength—how the music pours out of him!—as he manfully bears his character’s tribulations. . . . In the role of [Absalom’s] pregnant wife, Sherry Boone sang the ‘Surabaya Johnny’-ish plaint ‘Trouble Man’ and haunting ‘Stay Well’—the score’s breakout numbers—but proved to be in strained, rather raw voice Thursday.”—**Michael Sommers, *New Jersey Newsroom* (4 February 2011)**

“The Encores! concerts’ general mission of preserving scores above all else ensures that you experience this one in its full, unvarnished sumptuousness. Despite Weill’s dark and unusually minimal orchestration (12 pieces), his music captures native dignity, the bustle of city life, and the plangent feelings of life under assault as few compositions of the era could. . . . Anderson’s lyrics, alternately gritty and poetic evocations of individual and collective souls, are ideal complements. . . . ‘Cry, the Beloved Country’ . . . echoes with anger, regret, and unwilling acceptance, all captured in a matchless Weill tune that seems to encompass the hills and valleys of Africa and human experience alike. It’s music the likes of which does not exist elsewhere in musical theatre, but reverberates through you

with natural ease as it completes the story’s transition from specificity to universality. . . . [A] masterful work that, even 61 years after its debut, cries out to be heard.”—**Matthew Murray, *Talkin’ Broadway* (4 February 2011)**

“While some evenings at this series of Broadway musicals in concert bring the intoxicating delights of a bottle of vintage wine, and others savor sweetly of old-fashioned candy, magically fresh, at *Lost in the Stars* you often feel as if you were consuming a jumbo can of spinach. . . . This staging, directed by Gary Griffin, soberly presents its assets, most notably the glorious title song. . . . But despite the typical polish and commitment of the performers, led by Chuck Cooper in the central role, the intermittent seductions of the score—not Weill’s most exciting, by a long shot—cannot always make up for the dreary pieties of the material.”—**Charles Isherwood, *New York Times* (4 February 2011)**

“Packed with gorgeous and emotional musical moments. . . . [Weill’s] music for *Lost In The Stars* . . . represents his most dramatically rich work. . . . Anderson’s book and lyrics, in the style of musical dramas of the day, is filled with heart-on-its-sleeve sincerity and warm, simple poetry. . . . The evening is musically exceptional. But David Ives’ editing of the text and Griffin’s lack of character work dilute the book’s effectiveness, particularly in its ability to raise the score to dramatic heights. Chuck Cooper provides a strong, sympa-

thetic central presence as the humble Stephen Kumalo, particularly touching in the tenderness he brings to the beautiful title song. . . . Quentin Earl Darrington is mighty charismatic as the leader of the commenting choir; his baritone soaring with anguish in ‘Cry, the Beloved Country.’ . . . Absalom is played with a fine combination of innocence and nobleness by Daniel Breaker and Sherry Boone, as his pregnant girlfriend [Irina] sings her solos with an enthusiastic belt. In their non-singing roles Sharon Washington [Grace Kumalo] and John Douglas Thompson [John Kumalo] spend all-too-little time on stage and the best spoken acting scenes of the night are between Cooper and Daniel Gerroll [James Jarvis].”—Michael Dale, *Broadway World* (5 February 2011)

“I’ve seen Chuck Cooper do very fine work as an actor, and he seemed an excellent choice for Stephen. Unfortunately, he appears to have been directed to play the minister as a simple, naive, and gentle man. His performance confuses stateliness with profundity, and Cooper gives no hint of the inner turmoil and extreme anguish that lead Stephen to first question and then forcefully reject his faith. Indeed, his rendition of the title song, in which Stephen confesses to his young nephew, Alex, that he is questioning his religion, is performed like a reassuring lullaby.”—Erik Haagensen, *Back Stage* (5 February 2011)

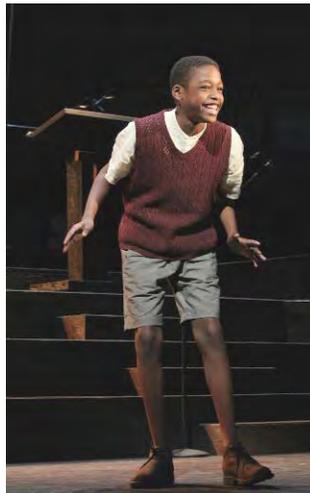
“The score offers a lush and varied musical landscape, including gorgeous, haunting choral work. The songs are mostly well sung, including Cooper’s take on the title song. . . . There are also moments that are strained and strident. Boone’s ‘Trouble Man’ comes off overly fearsome. On the other hand, the luxuriously talented Patina Miller knows how to sell a song. And, boy, does she as a shantytown working girl intent on hawking more than the ‘juicy rutabagas’ in the snappy tune ‘Who’ll Buy?’ . . . Every Encores! has an MVP. That honor belongs to Jeremy Gumbs (‘The Scottsboro Boys’), who plays Stephen’s whip-smart nephew, Alex. He turns ‘Big Mole,’ a tune about pluck and persistence, into a pure delight. . . . Gary Griffin’s thoughtful staging makes maximum use of the large cast and various levels on the stage, a smart way to underscore themes of separation. . . . It’s clear that some history should never be lost, in the stars or otherwise.”—Joe Dziemianowicz, *Daily News* (4 February 2011)

“Telling a grim story in an often solemn tone, [*Lost in the Stars*] makes few concessions to Broadway’s fondness for hit ‘numbers’ and comic relief. What it does have, in plenty, is the merger of passion and skill in Weill’s extraordinary score, its choral passages in particular handled with astonishing mastery. . . . Weill and Anderson didn’t wholly solve the difficulties of bringing this stony story to theatrical life. Gary Griffin’s concert staging, lacking the enriched details of a fully rehearsed production, made their work seem a rigid row of separable chunks, made still bumpier by Anderson’s propensity for spelling out his messages.”—Michael Feingold, *The Village Voice* (9 February 2011)

“[The] shattering story, and seductive Weill score had me spellbound. . . . Gripping or caressing, declamatory or insinuating, laughing or longing, it targets the gut as much as the ear. Highly chromatic, despite or because of unexpected modulations, the melodies unfailingly hit home and, once there, never leave the ravished memory.”—John Simon, *Uncensored John Simon* (8 February 2011)



Matthew (Clifton Duncan), Absalom (Daniel Breaker) and Johannes (Chiké Johnson) are tried by the Judge (James Rebhorn) for the murder of Arthur Jarvis. Photo: Joan Marcus



Alex (Jeremy Gumbs) belts out “Big Mole” and Linda (Patina Miller) enchants with “Who’ll Buy?” Photos: Joan Marcus



The two bereft fathers, Stephen Kumalo (Chuck Cooper) and James Jarvis (Daniel Gerroll), join hands in reconciliation. Photo: Joan Marcus

## Performances

### *Der Protagonist*

Kurt Weill Fest  
Dessau

Premiere: 25 February 2011

No, this was not a cloak-and-dagger affair. At opening night in Dessau, the weapon stuck in the stage floor, just behind the proscenium, served as a kind of courtroom evidence: “Exhibit A” from the bloody deed that had occurred in plain view of two audiences. The actual one, sitting in their seats in Dessau; and the onlookers on stage, who must witness in both Weill/Kaiser’s *Der Protagonist* and Leoncavallo’s *Pagliacci* a “real” killing as part of a performance, without any chance to intervene. A woman murdered in both cases by a man who simply lost it. In the role of an actor who appears in a play-within-a-play.

The upright dagger formed the startling centerpiece in the director’s conception—credit to André Bucker, intendant of the Dessau theater—and it calls forth a number of images. For one (to draw on Freud for old times’ sake), it’s a symbol of misogynist violence. Or—in the case of *Protagonist*—an allusion to the generation of young men that had unleashed, or suffered, violence on the battlefields of World War I and returned home (if at all) mentally disturbed, only to commit more deranged acts. It’s no surprise, then, that sex crimes played a prominent role in the literature and art of those years, as in George Grosz’s “John, the Lady-Killer.” Not to mention Brecht’s Mack the Knife and the “Moritat.”

The idea of combining *Protagonist* and *Pagliacci* into a double bill seems natural, given the similarities of subject, setting, and plot. Yet the pairing also runs the risk of dull duplication. If that is to be avoided, the differences need to be highlighted. The Dessau production generally pulled this off, especially in the sets: Monochrome, drab, self-restrained or even monastic in the case of Weill/Kaiser; colorful, abun-

dant, and imaginative for Leoncavallo. One assumes that this rather overt distinction aimed at the difference between the two lead roles. True, both are actors; both attach themselves to a woman (and imprison her at the same time). But the Protagonist (Angus Wood) does it because he is a “poor dog,” a crummy actor without a true audience, who must abide by the motto “Whose bread I eat, his praise I sing.” Incapable of attracting women, he remains awkwardly attached to his Sister. On the other hand, *Pagliacci*’s Canio (Sergey Drobyshevsky) is a true protagonist, self-assured and married to a much younger actress. He has an audience that cheers and reveres him, and eagerly awaits his performances. Yet his self-confidence, or rather complacency, brings about his



The Protagonist (Angus Wood) looks on as the Young Gentleman (Wiard Witholt) bends over the Sister (Iordanka Derilova). Photo: Claudia Heysel

downfall. For he, the gallant knight, cannot bear the fact that his wife cheated on him. Agitated by a scene in which she enacts a fling with someone else, he kills her—the old vexing play of appearance and reality, for which Bucker found a moving metaphor by having a group of children (the theater’s children’s chorus) act as pseudo-musicians “playing” toy instruments, while the orchestra performed the actual music in the pit.

Presenting the two operas in reverse order of composition made the double bill more compelling. It allows for a “culinary” intensification, as Kaiser’s text is clearly less “juicy” than Leoncavallo’s. But there is also a musico-dramatic crescendo: the mass scenes in *Pagliacci*—beautifully sung by the chorus (rehearsed by Helmut Sonne) with the required dash of *italianità*—offered plenty of room to maneuver for the stage director, set designer (Oliver Proske),

choreographer (Gabiella Gilardi) and costume designer (Katja Schröpfer), all of them interacting seamlessly and taking full advantage of their opportunities. In contrast, *Der Protagonist* renounces such opulence. This isn’t theater for the people presented at a street fair; this is private entertainment behind closed doors, intended for a circle of select guests, whose changing moods need to be accommodated. Hence there is no chorus, and the focal point is not society at large but the individual. Canio stabs his wife, Nedda (Iordanka Derilova) chiefly because he, the cuckolded husband, has been humiliated in public. The Protagonist, on the other hand, kills his Sister because he is a psychopath with incestuous inclinations. Here we have the spirit of expressionism, there we have

Italian verismo—and the music follows suit. Whereas *Pagliacci* displays a wonderful sense for stage effect, but in terms of form sticks to the conventions of number opera, the 24-year-old Weill created a richly nuanced score that achieves the highest level of compositional craftsmanship of his time and, at the same time, reveals the complex inner lives of the characters to such a degree that one cannot help but think of Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck* (whose world premiere preceded that of *Protagonist* by only three months).

Conductor Antony Hermus took absolute command of the Anhalt Philharmonic, which proved thoroughly proficient in the very different musical languages. One sensed throughout the ability to shape the music and the joy of performing it, not only with Leoncavallo’s seductive sounds but also with Weill’s “unwieldy” musical textures. The same could be said of the singers, among whom Derilova deserves special praise, not only for exquisitely handling the musical material of her two vastly different parts (the Sister in *Protagonist*; Nedda in *Pagliacci*), but also for fleshing out these two characters—one humble, the other more provocative—and bringing them to life.

Matthias Henke  
University of Siegen

## Performances

### *Der Silbersee*

*Stadttheater Hannover*

Premiere: 19 March 2011

When he composed *Der Silbersee* in 1932, Weill remained faithful to his idea of a musical theater that mattered. He also continued to combine elements of the “serious” and the “popular,” thus deploying and refining his unmistakable sound. With a libretto from the pen of Georg Kaiser, this seldom-performed work offers a mix of reality and fantasy and more than a touch of expressionism. Lars-Ole Walburg, the theater’s intendant since 2009 who doubled as stage director for this production, did not have an easy job. Yet he could rely on actors who worked together beautifully and whose performance convinced the audience by its wit but also by its sincerity. Drawn from the Stadttheater’s roster, the cast did not include professionally trained singers, but they handled their assignments quite well—with assurance and a surprisingly good feel for the music.

Severin’s hunger is real and he leaves no doubt about it. Martin Vischer portrayed him as a solitary and embittered character, kept alive only by a desire for revenge that fuels his ever-growing ire, culminating in the aria “Wie Odysseus an den Mast des Schiffes”—impressive and frightening at the same time. Olim (Andreas Schlager), on the other hand, is driven by guilt, the wellspring of his acts of generosity and altruism. Even though the reconciliation between the two former enemies at the end comes as a bit of a surprise, especially since Severin previously lacked any sense of compassion, Olim and Severin definitely come off as equals. Beatrice Frey feels thoroughly at home in the role of Frau von Luber, and her presentation—in part eccentric caricature—of a solicitous yet scheming housekeeper earns the most laughter in the course of the evening. Sachiko Hara even interacts with the audience in her role of the naive and wanton niece, Fennimore, but at times her diction lacks clarity. Acting as Olim’s conscience, the chorus casts a spell with its dramatic intensity and delicate tone. Given the work’s structure as a series of set pieces,

including dance passages, which leaves little room for spontaneous acting, the staging rightly took a grotesque and revue-like approach.

The orchestra led by Thomas Posth gave a winning performance that balanced the score’s more aggressive elements with the sentimental and late-romantic ones. Even though music and text no longer have the same audacity as they had in the 1933—and how could they?—they still carry a zeitgeist that proves surprisingly timeless, not least on account of the irony and the catchy tunes. The Orchester im Treppenhause (literally “the orchestra in the staircase”)—established by Posth in 2006—displays a real sense of responsibility to Weill’s score, bringing the music to life with fresh and vigorous playing, a real accomplishment. During the first two acts the orchestra remains in the pit, but for the third act the musicians take their seats onstage behind a screen and become part of the staging.

The production succeeds in presenting the work’s socially charged dualisms of poverty and affluence, friendship and hostility, and conflicting (im)moralities. Walburg has no need to draw on cynicism; instead, he handles the rather serious subject matter with a dash of humor that is in line with Weill’s music, also corresponding to the unaggressive tone of Kaiser’s play. The staging balances a minimalist approach with subtle dissonances in showing various social constructs, which lends the production honesty and a dramatic power that does not rely on cheap effects. Sets (Reinhild Blaschke) and props are relatively spare. A video screen (Bert Zander),

functioning as a magnifying glass of sorts, displays a variety of settings that provide clever backdrops for the actors. For instance, hunger is laid into the grave as a set of letters spelling out the word (they ultimately disappear into the orchestra pit), the contents of a shopping cart degenerate into a symbol of absurdity, or Severin, in his feverish dreams in the hospital, accidentally touches a hot light bulb (projected onto the screen) instead of the desired pineapple. A turntable facilitates the scene change to the castle, where a gigantic pineapple hangs in the spot where one would expect the all-too-predictable chandelier. Outlandish costumes (Anne Buffétrille) and hairstyles derived from 1950s futurism heighten the effect.

The fairy tale-like representation of the frozen lake (complete with snowflakes descending from the flies), where Olim and Severin’s hopeful yet utopian path ends, finally addresses the work’s subtitle, “A Winter’s Tale,” and calls to mind Heinrich Heine (and Caspar David Friedrich) with their views of a cold German society. In this production, even time seems to come to a standstill as the chorus marches in place. Though the pace slows a bit at the beginning of Act III, the overall positive impression remains. The audience shared this impression and reacted with a lot of laughter and spontaneous applause during the evening.

**Alexandra Dorothea Bönninghoff**  
Hannover



Frau von Luber (Beatrice Frey), Fennimore (Sachiko Hara), and Olim (Andreas Schlager) in Olim’s banquet hall. Photo: Katrin Ribbe

## Performances

### *Die Dreigroschenoper*

*Comédie française*  
Paris

Premiere: 2 April 2011

From the beginning, French-language productions of *Die Dreigroschenoper* have always been tainted by compromises. Gaston Baty got things underway at the Théâtre du Montparnasse in 1930 with a sanitized version of the work hindered by a poor translation. The French version of Pabst's film made a great impression on Parisian audiences, but in featuring crooner Albert Préjean, it burdened the work with a lowbrow, music-hall style.

Translator André Mauprey's adaptation became by default the original version of Weill/Brecht in France, and it was heard constantly in the music halls, sung by Florelle, Lys Gauty, Marianne Oswald, and lesser lights as well. This was what Weill heard during his exile in Paris. Shortly after he left, in 1937, the charismatic Yvette Guilbert headlined a production at the Théâtre de l'Etoile; Weill went so far as to compose two new songs for her.

Matters improved just after World War II, when the poet Boris Vian, a great admirer of Brecht, created new French versions of some Weill/Brecht songs (also from *Happy End*), which he offered to Catherine Sauvage as an alternative to Mauprey's sloppy sentimentality. Later, Jean-Claude Hémery undertook a new translation for the publisher L'Arche, and this has become the "official" version. The *Comédie française* performed Hémery's translation with minor modifications by Michel Bataillon to bring it up to date.

The problem with Hémery's translation isn't so much the dialogue but the songs. The relationship between words and music evaporates due to defects in both rhythm and rhyme. Only insignificant remnants of Brecht's poetic genius remain for the listener to grasp. So what is the answer? The ideal solution would be dialogue in French and songs performed in German (with supertitles), as was done in 2004 in a most successful production at the Théâtre National de la Colline. Nonetheless, Laurent Pelly and the *Comédie française* opted for an all-French version.

As I entered the ornate Salle Richelieu, I thought of all the great Brecht stagings I had seen there: Roland Bertin's portrayal of Galileo, directed by Antoine Vitez with set designs by Yannis Kokkos, put on just months after the Berlin Wall came down; *Mutter Courage* with Catherine Hiegel given during Brecht's centenary year. Here we are in 2011, and Laurent Pelly, who has shown great interest in Weill's work, makes his debut at the *Comédie* with *Die Dreigroschenoper*, less than six months after he mounted *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* in Toulouse. He's working with his preferred set designer, Chantal Thomas, who has collaborated on Pelly's most celebrated productions: Rameau's *Platée*, Offenbach's *La belle Hélène*, etc. She also was responsible for *Die sieben Todsünden* at the Palais Garnier in 2001, when she placed the family quartet on a flying sofa.

Serge Bagdassarian does a nice job with the "Moritat," with only his face lit by a tight spot. Then the audience is immersed immediately in post-Thatcher England; the Victorian era is left far behind. Beggars have been replaced by gangsters and violence reigns. The stage is enveloped in an industrial set straight out of a detective novel, and during scene changes, the noisy mechanisms themselves become an essential part of the staging (and generally make musical interludes unnecessary). Within this frame, Pelly and Thomas demonstrate their ingenuity, with Peachum's headquarters being where they do their best work.

Pelly emphasizes the irony of epic theater at the expense of the didactic element. One aspect of this emphasis is the slogans of Peachum's beggars, which function nicely as parodic mottoes within the combination of religious and middle-class trappings built into the set, exemplified by a sofa that also does duty as a *prie-Dieu*. The



Polly (Léonie Simaga) sings "Seeräuberjenny" as Mack (Thierry Hancisse) watches. Photo: Brigitte Enguérand

beggars' accessories are reused right through the end of the show, when the King's messenger, a pathetic, beat-up marionette, collapses in the face of Peachum & Co.'s placards.

The Peachums are played by Bruno Raffaelli and Véronique Vella, who have a glorious time with their parts, despite some lapses in diction when I attended. But Mackie and Polly's romance is consistently undercut: Every time they mention the moon a harsh white spotlight clicks on.

The show runs three full hours, and the cast members stay busy, unflinchingly creative in their movements. There are a number of successful moments, especially the realism of the wedding scene and the brothel scene. A cute touch in the wedding scene: a cell phone in one of the bags of stolen goods that rings at the worst possible moment. During the "Ballade vom angenehmen Leben," policemen in a carefully choreographed procession pass small gifts and "necessities" through the bars of Mack's cell after receiving their bribes.

But it is precisely the profusion of objects and little touches that obliterate the

corrosive genius of the text. Pelly's staging reminds us of his previous work, but in this particular play, which suffers from several tedious stretches, particularly in Brecht's 1931 revision, his method has the effect of undercutting its subversive potential. A bland, boring Mack, played by Thierry Hancisse, certainly doesn't help matters. The famous indictment of banks just before the third-act finale, borrowed from Hauptmann's *Happy End*, has almost no effect. And what of the other two finales? The first comes over well thanks to the Peachums' verve coupled with Léonie Simaga's fine clear voice and convincing portrayal of Polly as a sweet young thing. But the second raises itself to a higher plane of social criticism (like *Mahagonny*). The cast moves toward the audience on a cleared stage, with a tall, stunning Jenny (Sylvia Bergé) at the fore. Here at last we feel a hint of the power this show can bring to bear.

This production has received a great deal of coverage, with most of the attention focused on the actors, who were still working out their style early in the run (I saw the third performance). Fortunately, the musical treatment preserves Weill's magic in broad strokes, notwithstanding problems caused by the lyric translations. Conductor Bruno Fontaine makes no bones about his interest in German music from the 1920s. Here he has assembled a group of thirteen players from the top ensembles in Paris, so a good balance with the singers is guaranteed. His orchestration of "Lucy's Aria," which reaches delirious heights in the hands of Marie-Sophie Ferdane, stands out as a hair-raising highlight in mild-mannered surroundings. Fontaine's tempos are a bit slow, but his reading makes a worthy alternative to the incisive "baroque" rendering of the 2004 production at the Colline, which I still consider a model. That's not surprising, since original-language productions have inevitably made a stronger impression in Paris.

**Pascal Huynh**  
Paris

## Performances

### *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*

*Oper Köln*

Premiere: 23 March 2011

By the time Jenny refuses to bail out Jimmy and effectively places him in the executioner's hands, it will dawn on even the slowest audience member that Weill and Brecht considered earlier operatic models obsolete, thus bidding farewell to "rescue" scenarios from the enlightenment period (think *Fidelio*) or romantic redemptive excesses à la Wagner.

Despite scattered criticism in the press, Katharina Thalbach's staging of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* in Cologne can be considered a solid success. In musical terms, the production is actually brilliant. The Gürzenich Orchestra led by Lothar Koenigs played with great precision and integrated the "dirty" instruments such as saxophone and banjo, which are largely responsible for the specific 1920s feel, into a thoroughly symphonic and yet very tight sound that showcases Weill's art as an orchestrator. At times, though, the balance between orchestra and singers was slightly off (to the detriment of the latter). This should have been corrected, as the singers, especially Matthias Klink (Jimmy) and Regina Richter (Jenny), and also the chorus—always on pitch—present themselves not only as consummate musicians but also as convincing actors in an outstanding team effort. Another culprit may have been a cyclorama that was used mainly during Act I, for even though much of the action takes place downstage, the words do not always come across (I saw the production three times).

Thalbach's staging is coherent and of a piece. The production exudes an atmosphere of the 1930s; the costumes (Angela Rieck) in particular create a historical ambience. In the first act,

Thalbach employs Caspar Neher's famous half-curtain, which, in Acts Two and Three, gives way to a gigantic shipwreck that sits—slightly tilted—in the middle of the desert. As the program notes explained, set designer Momme Röhrbein took his inspiration from the virtually dried-up Aral Sea, where human miscalculation and greed led to an environmental disaster of gigantic proportions. However, the ecological reference seems a bit forced: a fashionable yet dispensable subtext that reveals itself only to readers of the program booklet. The staging itself does not address environmental issues. The shipwreck simply functions as an imposing symbol of the collective failure of Mahagonny, while its horizontally layered decks offer plenty of room for cleverly staged simultaneous scenes, and Jimmy's escapist voyage to Alaska finds a perfect setting here as well.

Dogmatic Brecht disciples may shake their heads as the production nears its end, where didactic aspects are abandoned in favor of human emotions. The production thereby exposes the limits of epic musical theater, as nearly everything that happens onstage tends inevitably toward the sensual. And Thalbach has given in to this somewhat natural tendency. All the more puzzling, then, that she omitted the "Crane Duet," which would have provided a good opportunity to cool off after the heat generated by the "Love Scene."

**Andreas Eichhorn**  
Cologne University



Jenny (Regina Richter) with the other girls. Photo: Paul Leclaire

---

THE KURT WEILL FOUNDATION FOR MUSIC, INC.

7 East 20th Street

New York, NY 10003-1106

---

## THE KURT WEILL EDITION

The Kurt Weill Edition makes available to performers and scholars the works of one of the most frequently performed, fascinating, and provocative composers of the Twentieth Century.

### Series I - STAGE

(24 volumes)

### Series II - CONCERT

(9 volumes)

### Series III - SCREEN

(1 volume)

### Series IV - MISCELLANEA

(2+ volumes)



#### AVAILABLE VOLUMES

#### **Zaubernacht** (SER. I, VOL. 0)

edited by Elmar Juchem and Andrew Kuster

#### **Der Protagonist**, op. 15 (SER. I, VOL. 1)

edited by Gunther Diehl and Jürgen Selk

#### **Die Dreigroschenoper** (SER. I, VOL. 5)

edited by Stephen Hinton and Edward Harsh

#### **The Firebrand of Florence** (SER. I, VOL. 18)

edited by Joel Galand

#### **Chamber Music** (SER. II, VOL. 1)

edited by Wolfgang Rathert and Jürgen Selk

#### **Music with Solo Violin** (SER. II, VOL. 2)

Concerto for Violin and Wind Instruments, op. 12,  
Der neue Orpheus, op. 16; edited by Andreas Eichhorn

#### **Die Dreigroschenoper: full-color facsimile of the holograph full score** (SER. IV, VOL. 1)

edited by Edward Harsh

#### **Popular Adaptations, 1927-1950** (SER. IV, VOL. 2)

edited by Charles Hamm, Elmar Juchem and Kim H. Kowalke

#### FORTHCOMING VOLUMES

#### **Johnny Johnson** (SER. I, VOL. 13)

edited by Tim Carter

#### **Lady in the Dark** (SER. I, VOL. 16)

edited by Bruce McClung

#### **Die sieben Todsünden** (SER. I, VOL. 10)

edited by Kim H. Kowalke

#### **One Touch of Venus** (SER. I, VOL. 17)

edited by Jon Alan Conrad

For prices and subscription information, direct your web browser to <http://www.kwf.org/kwe>