

Love Life

Theater Freiburg

Premiere: 9 December 2017

Among Golden Age musicals, *Love Life* (1948), the sole collaboration between Kurt Weill and Alan Jay Lerner, remains buried treasure. Neither the libretto nor the vocal score was published, and a strike by union musicians in 1948 forestalled a cast recording. Even the eight numbers published as sheet music were effectively kept off the air by an ASCAP radio embargo. Its obscurity is especially regrettable because *Love Life* represents Weill's most innovative and radical Broadway show, both dramaturgically and politically. Spanning the years 1791 to 1948—during which time history moves on but the protagonists do not age—the piece intertwines the personal and political to question narratives of social progress that anchored post-World War II U.S. culture. The first production chalked up a healthy run of 252 performances despite rehearsals and tryouts that saw more revisions than any other Weill musical, and divisions (not to say puzzlement) among audiences and critics, yet it failed to recoup its initial investment. The absence of published material ensures that most musical theater aficionados and scholars know the piece more by rumor than from experience. In histories of Broadway, *Love Life* has achieved an almost mythic status and is correctly singled out (along with Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Allegro* from 1947) as the first concept musical and inspiration for classics such as *Cabaret*, *Company*, and *Follies*. Under the editorship of Joel Galand, the Kurt Weill Edition has painstakingly assembled a complete libretto and full score, which it will soon publish. Theater Freiburg has taken advantage of Galand's work, presenting both the fully staged European continental premiere and the German-language premiere (book and lyrics translated by Dramaturg Rüdiger Bering) of a musical that, for me at least, proves a revelation.

A medium-size German theater in a city of 200,000, Theater Freiburg deploys all its forces—full orchestra and ensembles of singers, actors, choristers, and dancers—to stage an elaborate and carefully conceived production of a musical that is more manifestly and unambiguously American than any other Kurt Weill show. Subtitled “A Vaudeville,” *Love Life* employs a variety of musical styles and deliberately juxtaposes relatively realistic book scenes with self-consciously theatrical “acts,” which range in style from satire to musical comedy, soft-shoe to “Negro Quartette.” The oscillation of styles is matched by an alternation in the musical's focus as it moves between the personal struggles of a none-too-happy couple, Samuel and Susan Cooper, and the social and economic disruptions caused by industrialization in the U.S. These historical forces, which imperil and ultimately destroy their marriage, are portrayed in satirical numbers (songs such as “Economics” and “Progress”) that prove that economics, i.e., industrial capitalism, is “awful bad for love.” Although Weill and Lerner's focus on inwardness and intimacy set against the destructive modern world makes this musical unique, it also reinvents an American-style expressionism that uses a personal journey to stage a potent critique of modernity. Its dramatic and theatrical ingenuity is underlined by one of Weill's most motivically complex, tuneful, and brilliantly orchestrated scores,



Sam (David Arnsperger) and Susan (Rebecca Jo Loeb) discuss family planning in Part I

PHOTO: BIRGIT HUPFELD

whose use of recurring melodic fragments and leitmotifs is more characteristic of opera than musical comedy. Watching the production, I realized that *Love Life's* mining of U.S. musical theater history to tell a story of mismatched lovers makes it *the* indispensable antecedent of Sondheim's *Follies*.

Love Life presents multiple challenges for German theaters because of its mixture of styles and genres as well as the forthright Americanness of its “acts.” The director of the Freiburg production, Joan Anton Rechi, clearly understands and dramatizes the show's structure and its alternation between diegetic and non-diegetic numbers. Yet his theatrical solution to its puzzles introduces a new set of problems. Fearing, unfairly I believe, that German audiences would be bewildered by its vaudevillian styles (even though there are analogues in German performance traditions), he chooses to set the musical in a movie theater and change all the referents from theatrical to cinematic. Using Theater Freiburg's large turntable, designer Alfons Flores devises a double-sided set that, as it revolves, changes between the interior of a movie house (for book scenes) and its front steps and entrance, which become a kind of miniature proscenium for the vaudeville scenes. Though an ingenious solution, the alternation between interior and exterior is sabotaged by Rechi's decision to turn *Love Life* into a roller-coaster ride through Hollywood classics, from Shirley Temple to Marilyn Monroe, *Casablanca* to *Vertigo*. Oddly, Rechi reframes the piece by using a gaggle of characters from a Hollywood musical, *The Wizard of Oz*, that is not well-known to German audiences and whose narrative, themes, and characters are utterly different from those of *Love Life*. This sort of analogy is misleading and burdens the musical with irrelevant Hollywood clichés. A few of Rechi's cinematic analogues are inventive, such as his use of multiple Charlie Chaplins and clips from *Modern Times* (for “Progress”) or a Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers dance going haywire (for “Punch and Judy Get a Divorce”). The latter is beautifully underlined by a sequence of period “The End” titles projected on the cyclorama. Rechi also succeeds with the climactic Minstrel Show, turning it into a kaleidoscopic, fairy-tale inspired variety show that features a *faux* Groucho Marx as Mr. Cynic and a brilliant coloratura Snow White as Miss Ideal Man.

But many of Rechi's choices prove inappropriate and disingenuous. Perhaps the most unfortunate examples are his use of a *Vertigo* masquerade at the top of the second act and a



PHOTO: BRIGIT HUPFELD

quartet of singing, dancing Boris Karloff Frankenstein clones (for “Economics”). The Frankenstein allusions reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of the point of the song, which details not the dehumanization and commodification of human beings, but the crushing impact of modern economic imperatives on intimate relationships. (The singing monsters also regrettably evoke one of the most brilliant parodies of a Hollywood musical ever devised, Gene Wilder and Peter Boyle’s “Puttin’ on the Ritz” from Mel Brooks’s *Young Frankenstein*.) In both these instances, the cinematic referents confuse the issues and obscure the points that Weill and Lerner are making. Rechi’s choice of a cinematic frame, moreover, eliminates Sam and Susan’s tight-rope walk in the final scene (in favor of having the family leave the movie theater together) and puts a rosy spin on Weill and Lerner’s meticulously ambiguous ending, which leaves the protagonists literally up in the air.

Despite these questionable choices, the musicians and singers deserve all the acclaim they have been receiving in the

Street Scene

Teatro Real, Madrid

13–18 February, 26 May – 1 June 2018

Excerpts from selected reviews

What a superb display of talent in Weill’s music: his creativity and range, his capacity to assimilate popular music and draw on fundamentally American rhythms, yet give them operatic substance and place an operatic stamp upon them.

Patricia Racette embodied Anna Maurant splendidly, with that quality of delivery and dramatic intensity that always characterizes her work. Suitably aggressive, blockheaded, and obtuse was Paulo Szot’s Frank Maurant. ... Also deserving mention among the large cast: Eric Greene as the building’s doorman Henry Davis, the appropriately naïve and affected Jenny Hildebrand (Marta Fontanals-Simmons), and Richard Burkhard as Harry Easter, the married man eager to deceive the young and inexperienced Rose Maurant.

Raúl Chamorro Mena
Codalario, 20 February 2018

German press. Special credit must go to James Holmes for expert musical preparation. (Illness prevented him from conducting the performances, which were taken over by Daniel Carter.) The stand-out performer of the evening is American mezzo-soprano Rebecca Jo Loeb as Susan, whose beautiful, evenly produced voice, clear diction, and skill at putting over a song provided a star-making turn. Her eleven o’clock number, “Mr. Right,” was brilliantly sung and acted and turned into the show-stopper it should be. As Samuel, the German baritone David Arnsperger ably partnered Loeb and gave a musically alert and earnest performance. Among the ensemble, Tim Al-Windawe, John Carpenter, Pascal Hufschmid, and Samantha Gaul deserve special mention, as do dancers Maria Pires and Graham Smith for both dancing and choreographing “Punch and Judy Get a Divorce.” But the production was handicapped by its failure to utilize more dancers. The score offers several opportunities besides “Punch and Judy,” but they were wasted due to rudimentary choreography and slapdash execution. Although Carter coaxed strong performances from the orchestra, chorus, and soloists, his sometimes inflexible tempos did not always allow the music to breathe as naturally as it should.

Despite my reservations about the Freiburg performance, the theater—along with editor Joel Galand—deserve special commendation for putting *Love Life* back on stage. Let us hope this revival will encourage other theaters in the U.S., the U.K., and Germany to present this rediscovered Kurt Weill masterpiece that changed the course of Broadway history.

David Savran
CUNY Graduate Center

Co-producer Konzert Theater Bern in Switzerland has announced their dates for this production of Love Life: 31 August and 2, 5, 7, 8, 9, and 11 September 2018.



PHOTO: JAVIER DEL REAL

Tim Murray exercised strong rhythmic control over the orchestra, which was hugely important, especially in the wind section. He also gave strong support to all the singers, who needed a firm grounding to help them navigate the wide variety of musical styles that the composer utilizes in this difficult score.

ISanidad.com, 19 February 2018

Ultimately, what difference does it make if this is an opera or a musical? What good does it do to reduce works of art to pre-existing labels that explain nothing? Street Scene evades every label except the only one that matters: it is one of the most extraordinary works of musical theater of the entire twentieth century.

Artistic Director Joan Matabosch in Huffington Post, 16 February 2018

Fulljames's staging presents us with a large apartment building crammed with human life in which the stifling heat makes itself felt from the very beginning. The work's visual climax occurs during the great dance number "Moon-Faced, Starry-Eyed"—which completely interrupts the plot—when we see an illuminated vision of the city skyline spread across the back of the stage, a fitting tribute to Arthur Pita's dazzling choreography.

**Germán García Tomás
Mundoclasico.com, 21 February 2018**

This Teatro Real coproduction with Monte-Carlo and Köln boasts a staging by John Fulljames that exhibits the solidity and flexibility characteristic of British directors ... Dick Bird's set and costume design support the staging well. The performance overflows with dynamism and exerts real power, and the singers display remarkable acting capacity. The work draws more on musical theater traditions than opera, but the change is welcome.

**Tomás Marco
El Mundo, 14 February 2018**



Sam Kaplan (Joel Prieto) and Rose Maurant (Mary Bevan)

PHOTO: JAVIER DEL REAL

The overall conception at Teatro Real is hyperrealistic, as the work demands, allowing an accumulation of small stories which make up one great story to be set forth naturally and effectively. Music and dialogue are interlinked or superimposed at all times with a fluency that does the authors proud. In the midst of such a natural flow, the only disturbance comes from overamplified honks, traffic noise, and sirens, which are at times excessive and probably unnecessary. The large cast, with dozens of small roles, requires an almost choral approach throughout. Many singers are outstanding, foremost among them Mary Bevan as Rose Maurant; her singing, acting, and dialogue offer a continuous lesson in how to give full weight to this repertoire in the opera house.

**Luis Gago
El País, 14 February 2018**

A voyage that sweeps us out of our reality into a story on the stage for which we have primed ourselves, and which when all is said and done turns out to be ... our reality.

It would be a shame if opera lovers don't make the effort to go to Teatro Real. We all need experiences like this that make us think about stories at a fundamental level, and at the same time, about opera and music and about why we go to the theater in the first place. That's what art, in any manifestation, is for.

**Gabriel Ramirez
El Correo de Andalucía, 17 February 2018**

All translations by Natasha Nelson and Dave Stein.

The difficult task of coordinating all the performers' movements was solved with great skill. The choreography of the "Children's Game" was superb, also in the nurses' "Lullaby," and the chorus sang their parts with pathos in "The Woman Who Lived Up There." Both children and adults move with perfect precision within the set, which fills the entire stage with a structure accessible by several staircases. ... The realistic set is lent color only by a lighting design [James Farncombe] that creates a poetic atmosphere throughout.

The magnificent orchestra was conducted with idiomatic feel and absolute precision; the choral contribution was also of high quality. ... Each

and every one of the actors in this American tragedy communicated emotion and drama, recalling 1929 and 1947 in 2018. Alas, the world has changed little in all that time.

**Fernando Herrero
La Norte de Castilla, 15 February 2018**

If you didn't see Street Scene in February, don't miss it in May!

**Rafael Fernández De Larrinoa
Audio Clásica, 19 February 2018**

DVD ON THE WAY

Those who couldn't make it to Madrid in February or May, or who didn't view the live stream of the 16 February performance on mezzo.tv, will be able to experience this production through a home video release currently in preparation from Bel Air Classiques, the label that issued the 2010 Teatro Real production of *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*.

Zaubernacht

Knickerbocker Chamber Orchestra and Jody Oberfelder Projects

14–18 March 2018

After an absence of 93 years, Kurt Weill's first stage work, *Zaubernacht* ("Magic Night"), returned to New York in March. The long nap has refreshed this early yet sophisticated work. For a new production, staged at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, choreographer-director Jody Oberfelder has created an updated take on this toys-come-to-life story, with some contemporary references. Her tale and accompanying choreography hew closely to the structure of Weill's score, rendered by the Knickerbocker Chamber Orchestra under conductor Gary S. Fagin.

Originally written for children, *Zaubernacht* was the brainchild of Wladimir Boritsch, a Russian theater promoter who wrote the original scenario. At the 1922 Berlin premiere, the menagerie of toys were played by students of ballerina and choreographer Mary Zimmermann. Now those roles, with the exception of the main character (the Child), are played by adults. That distinction underscores Oberfelder's emphasis not just on youth, but on the act of learning. The Child is emboldened by watching and mimicking, and perhaps surpassing, what her toys can do.

The composition itself formed an important part of Weill's education; he wrote it as a 22-year-old student. Connoisseurs will recognize his sound, foreshadowing the melodic yet unsettling quality of his theatrical masterworks. *Zaubernacht* was a first step toward a goal he articulated late in life: "I have learned to make my music speak directly to the audience, to find the most immediate, the most direct way to say what I want to say, and to say it as simply as possible." Yet the work languished after the American premiere in 1925, and the full score was lost. Not until 2005, when the instrumental parts were found in a Yale University library safe, did a reconstruction of the original score become feasible.

In constructing a scenario for 2018, Oberfelder dispenses with some of the original toys but retains others, such as a Jack-in-the-Box, and mixes in newcomers. Sometimes the generations cross: Hansel and Gretel don pink knit caps as part of the Pussy Hat Brigade, a reference to the contemporary women's movement. Still, Oberfelder's determination to stick to her story recalls Weill's direct approach, and she avoids superfluous dancing, mugging, or selling. That is especially true of the Child, played by Lyla Forest Butler. Young but mature, she fully absorbed Oberfelder's direction, interacting with her toys as if no audience were present.

The magic begins with the Toy Fairy, a role sung by soprano Hai-Ting Chinn wearing a glamorous, sheer cape trimmed with tiny lights. The Child sets out on a dream-like voyage and quickly encounters trouble. Her seemingly beautiful Barbie dolls, danced by Lindsey Mandolini and Hannah Wendel, turn out to be garden-variety mean girls. Oberfelder constricts them with stiff arms



The Toy Fairy (Hai-Ting Chinn) initiates the action with her aria.

PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER DUGGAN

and high steps on the balls of their feet, like the actual dolls whose plastic feet were designed for high heels. Even the Child's pillows turn out to be crazy-eyed monsters. But she acquires strength by learning from a benevolent Knight. With strong arms, long leg extensions, and a regal bearing, the Knight, danced by Mei Yamanaka, encourages the youngster to fight back.

Along the journey, the Child is duped into giving her friends some apples poisoned by the Witch. Mary Madsen makes this witch sexy, with the look of an attractive schoolteacher who has gone from disillusioned to evil. Her movement is sassy and low. A battle for the fate of the earth ensues, as the Queen of Darkness (Madsen) takes over. Some of this battle is depicted effectively with videos projected onto the screen. The Child finds the confidence to marshal her soldiers and friends and ends up saving the day after some back-and-forth between the forces of good and evil.

From the cues in Weill's music and the costumes by Summer Lee Jake, we can clearly identify friend and foe. But the finer points of the plot are evident only after re-reading the notes. Do they matter? Not really, except that Oberfelder's approach is so tightly focused on her narrative that she passes up opportunities for musicality in movement. With so little dance for the sake of dance, we experience characters set to music rather than dance set to music. The Jack-in-the-Box's movement is pretty much what you'd expect from a jack-in-the-box. The man on stilts (the vaguely political Giant, played by Ned Malouf) can't do much except lumber on and off stage. Of course, not every part needs its own virtuoso wow-moment. The doughy black shapes onstage during the battle, called Sludge in the program, would not be truly sludge-like if they were doing arabesques.

Oberfelder makes artistic choices that are true to her vision, and in that she succeeds. But it will remain for subsequent choreographers to find room for more performance—more steps—in this score.

Pia Catton
New York

The Threepenny Opera

Boston Lyric Opera

16–25 March 2018

Boston has played an important role in the history of *The Threepenny Opera*. In 1952, nearly two decades after its short-lived Broadway premiere in 1933, Leonard Bernstein resurrected *Threepenny* for a concert performance of Marc Blitzstein's new translation at the first Brandeis Festival of the Creative Arts, featuring Lotte Lenya as Jenny and Jo Sullivan as Polly. Within two years, Lenya and Sullivan were reunited off-Broadway at the Theater de Lys, joined by such gifted young performers as Charlotte Rae, Beatrice Arthur, Scott Merrill, Gerald Price, and John Astin, for the now legendary production that ran for seven record-breaking years. The original cast album, the first recording in English, is still in print (it's a shame the translation was compromised when MGM Records insisted on bowdlerizing Blitzstein's most risqué lyrics).

Boston has been home to several other memorable productions. Sarah Caldwell staged it in 1988, with Phyllis Curtin as Mrs. Peachum, Jeanne Ommerle as Polly, and Sarah Reese as Jenny. And back in 1965, Timothy Mayer, perhaps best remembered for directing Brecht's *Mother Courage* with Linda Hunt at the Boston Shakespeare Company, staged a *Threepenny Opera* at Harvard's Agassiz Theatre in which the young Stockard Channing stole the show with her haunting, haunted Jenny.

Now the Boston Lyric Opera has added *Threepenny Opera* to its repertoire in a production staged at the intimate Huntington Avenue Theatre by the young Los Angeles director James Darrah. Its few striking moments were sadly overshadowed by too many unfortunate decisions.

The staging began well. The curtain rose on mysterious figures standing in a fog with their backs to the audience. The Street

Singer (baritone Daniel Belcher, who also played Tiger Brown) circled the anonymous crowd singing the famous "Moritat," which celebrates the accomplishments of Mack the Knife. As he mimed slashing them, one at a time they dropped slowly to the stage.

There weren't many more moments of such mystery. I liked the way Darrah and lighting designer Pablo Santiago suddenly isolated the singers in a spotlight for several of the solo songs—those hair-raising musical interludes that don't feel the need to further the plot—or when cast members discreetly pulled a shabby orange curtain across the front of the stage to conceal Polly and Macheath's raunchy wedding night.

But neither the abstract set, the unflattering costumes, nor the translation by Michael Feingold suggested any particular time or place or point of view. Where were we? What did Victoria's coronation have to do with this nowhere-land? Whose working-class accent was Polly (Kelly Kaduce, an otherwise refined soprano) imitating? (Roseanne?) She—and almost everyone else—cackled, shrieked, growled, and bellowed the dialogue. Crude is fine for Mrs. Peachum (mezzo-soprano Michelle Trainor) but weird for Polly. At the end of their "Jealousy Duet," Polly and Lucy (soprano Chelsea Basler) were shoving pieces of cake into each other's faces. Darrah directed Polly not as an ingénue, but as a character who already knows the ropes, which undermined any sense of her as someone who's learning to figure things out.

Only Mr. Peachum (esteemed baritone James Maddalena) and Macheath (Christopher Burchett) escaped the general coarseness. Maddalena was quietly menacing. But Burchett, whom I've admired in previous BLO productions, especially Peter Maxwell Davies's *The Lighthouse*, seemed a blank, hardly the magnetic center of the opera. Macheath's "Tango Ballad" with Jenny (particularly well sung by Wagnerian mezzo-soprano Renée Tatum) lacked any sexual charge.

And it was barely a tango. Not just a choreographic failure, but a limitation of the conducting. Under David Angus, Weill's cheeky variety of musical styles (popular ballads, dance tunes, hymns, army songs, arias, chorales) lacked an incisive acknowledgment of their differences. It was good to hear Weill's original instrumentation—saxophones, trumpets, bass clarinet, banjo, mandolin, Hawaiian guitar, accordion, piano, harmonium (electronic)—but this shark had no teeth.

In 1954, Virgil Thomson hailed Blitzstein's adaptation as "the finest thing of its kind in existence. He has got the spirit of the play and rendered it powerfully, colloquially, compactly. And his English versions of the songs are so apt prosodically, fit their music so perfectly, that one can scarcely believe them to be translations at all." But when BLO couldn't get the rights to the translation used in 2016 by London's National Theatre, rather than hark back to Boston's 1952 premiere of Blitzstein's version, the company turned to Michael Feingold's translation. Unfortunately, the director's rejection of supertitles rendered most of the lyrics incomprehensible.

My fear is that this inert, often misguided production might have made audiences unfamiliar with the delights of *Threepenny Opera* mistake the actual source of their disappointment.

Lloyd Schwartz
Boston



Lucy (Chelsea Basler) and Polly (Kelly Kaduce) in the aftermath of the "Jealousy Duet"

PHOTO: ILZAVOLL PHOTOGRAPHY