

Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny

Festival Aix-en-Provence

Premiere: 6 July 2019

Make no mistake, this is about you! After Jim was laid out dead on the stage floor, conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen brought his very loud orchestra (London's Philharmonia) to an abrupt halt. Black-out. The maestro then turned his face into the spotlight to confront the audience and maintained his stare. There was no mistake, the music was about us.

Stage director Ivo van Hove worked on a wide open, bare sound stage. This was not opera. It was nowhere. That was exactly the point, and that is where Fatty, Moses, and the Widow Begbick built their city Mahagonny to satisfy their greed and our lust. All this greed and lust were in-your-face—on this the orchestra insisted. The maestro gave a very loud, clinical, and chiseled reading of the Kurt Weill score from the get-go, making it very clear that it is highly sophisticated, brilliant music, and that it is confrontational. Van Hove's staging was likewise confrontational. On the bare stage was a projection screen serving as the glass plate of a microscope, under which we would study the faces and the souls of the hordes of men who came to Mahagonny to forget their dreary lives and to indulge their pleasures and vices. Then came the whores from Alabama and four lumberjacks from Alaska, a bit lost in the visual cacophony of this teeming world.

It was a chaotic stage, but the videographer singled out the faces of a few new arrivals while Kurt Weill singled out their voices—Jenny the whore, Jim Mahoney the sensitive, soul-searching lumberjack who goes a bit crazy, and his three buddies, Jack the glutton, Joe the boxer, and Bill the miser. If their voices were at first nearly lost in the melee, that's because they were in fact in the midst of a melee. Little by little their projected faces

bared their souls to us as their voices grew stronger. The maestro did not indulge the easy rhythms of Kurt Weill's jazz, ragtime, and folk influences. It was musically obvious there was a lot of tough stuff to come.

Jim, the lumberjack, got a bit maudlin and then he got bored. There came a hurricane (three giant fans and a wounded citizen suffering melodramatically on the screen), Jim had his revelation, and the hordes (well, the thirty men of the Pygmalion Chorus and fifteen supernumeraries) shouted it in our faces. Blackout.

The lid was off—unbounded liberty to satisfy any of your cravings, and to get whatever you want, if you can pay for it. A stage was needed to play out the demises of Jack the glutton and Joe the boxer, so one was constructed stage right. There was simulated humping against its back wall, and at the same time we saw very graphic humping projected on the screen, the whore's face directly in our face.

Austrian tenor Nikolai Schukoff was Jim Mahoney, the ring-leader of it all. Schukoff is very charismatic, easily projecting a sexuality to be satisfied, but willing to show a softer side and maybe yearn for a better, truer life. Schukoff is a big performer and easily found the force needed to bust things wide open in Mahagonny.

Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny is the epitome of didactic, epic theater. These days social commentary wears thin on the operatic (or any) stage. As the citizens of Mahagonny were wearying of its corruption we too were wearying. Maybe Brecht was as well, so he added a bit of witty, heavy irony—the Mahagonny inhabitants dream of a new, better city, Benares, better known these days as Varanasi, the Hindu city of death. Van Hove obliged by projecting onto the screen hazy, smoky images of this city of ritualistic cremation as seen from the Ganges.

In the penultimate scene van Hove brought, finally, our total focus and our held-back sympathy onto Jim Mahoney when Jim delays his death as long as he can in a prolonged, moving, and hopeless monologue, and then makes his farewell to Jenny in a beautiful, tender duet. Here there were no screen projections, no microscope. Here, finally, was real human emotion for us to feel, not to judge.

The fall of the city of Mahagonny was of a scenic magnitude to equal the gigantic musical efforts emanating from the pit. There was smoke and fire, there was thunder and lightning, then more smoke and fire raged from the pit. It was the destruction of Valhalla you always wanted to see but never got. No longer must you settle for Wagner's account, pale by comparison, of such world-shattering cataclysm.

Michael Milenski
Opera Today

The review was published originally, in slightly different form, on operatoday.com.

The use of video is an important part of Ivo van Hove's staging, as in the Gluttony Scene from Act II



PHOTO: PASCAL VICTOR

Die sieben Todsünden

Ensemble Modern
HK Gruber, conductor

21 September 2019

Neglected even more than the Weimar-era theater works after his death, Weill's "ballet-chanté" *Die sieben Todsünden* is now heard in concert halls with relative frequency. Yet the quasi-Classical scoring (six woodwinds, six brass, strings plus piano, harp, percussion and banjo doubling guitar) renders it too expensive for smaller, independent theatrical companies outside major cities, and it is staged only intermittently by larger opera and ballet companies. To address this gap, the Kurt Weill Foundation has commissioned a new scoring from HK Gruber and Christian Muthspiel. They settled on the "sinfonietta" model (fifteen players, one of each instrument except two clarinets), an ensemble commonly used in the later twentieth century with a sizeable repertoire, designed to replicate Weill's felicitous scoring as closely as possible while making full productions more affordable.

Of course, unenviable choices must be made; gone are the oboe (sparingly but tellingly deployed by Weill), tuba, and harp. A second clarinet is added because it can blend across a wide range and two clarinets provide at least one homogeneous unit for wind figuration pairings (in thirds) that are such a dominant feature of the score. The piano and banjo/guitar are retained for their distinctive jazzy, "pit-band" color and simulation of harp timbre.

With a reduced instrumental line-up, it can be a struggle to marshal enough voices to cover all the notes, especially in *tutti* passages. Fortunately, Gruber and Muthspiel have done a superb job redistributing the instrumental parts so that the tessitura remains intact and the colors are largely preserved. Weill's three-, four-, and five-part chord textures within the winds, brass, and strings, often in closed position, are carefully matched, and his extensive use of seventh chords is afforded enough doublings to maintain harmonic integrity. With some subtlety, they suggest the original plangent oboe color in distinctive wind voicings by placing the horn slightly higher than expected in the instrumen-

tal texture. Yet there is nothing jarring; in fact, numerous long passages of accompaniment to the soprano are transferred intact from the original. The orchestrators did leave behind a few fingerprints: the piano augments the strings for brilliance and weight of figuration in "Zorn" and "Habsucht," the piccolo and violin interlace fleetingly in "Stolz," and the flute amusingly uses a grace note to suggest a harmonic filling-in of a widely spaced chord in "Habsucht."

Here and there, the usual hazards of orchestra-to-ensemble reductions are manifest: occasional thinness in *tutti* passages, some individual instrumental ranges pushed a little high for comfort, and never quite enough bass (the lone double bass is not entirely adequate when the trombone is busy covering the tenor register). Since all of the players become soloists, it is difficult for the ensemble to achieve homogeneity, although Weill's counterpoint comes through more readily in the new version; so does his highly effective percussion part, unchanged from the original. The new scoring sounds even more immediate and contemporary.

The world premiere at the Beethovenfest Bonn indicated that the advantages overcome any doubts. Gruber conducted an energetic rendering with vigorous accentuation and spirited tempos, yet tempered with considerable flexibility (with the exception of the "motorik" sixth sin, "Habsucht") that allowed the pulse to vary between themes and a distinctive rubato across important melodic upbeats. He vividly characterized the styles (dance bands, church music, serenade, processions) and idioms (foxtrot, waltz, march, even a hint of Bruckner in the coda of "Habsucht") that Weill ingeniously employs.

Sarah Maria Sun, a soprano with vast experience performing twentieth-century repertoire, sang with attractive, sinuous tone and textual sensitivity and clarity, readily capturing the outwardly cheerful but ironic tone Anna I uses to cajole her sister along their all-American journey. The Family (a male quartet described by Gruber as a cross between the Comedian Harmonists and a cantor) was sung by the *a cappella* ensemble, amarcord, with ringing tonal color, hugely satisfying vocal blend, and an exuberant textual delivery that was thrilling. Ensemble Modern played with poised and solid tonal quality without losing the essential lightness of the music's forward motion. Individual phrasing was strong and their wonderfully exact articulation rendered rhythms crisp and buoyant. Special mention must go to Uwe Dirksen, trombone, for the sweet tone and subtle, irresistible swing of his solo lines.

Although the vast World Conference Center concert hall is not the most atmospheric of venues and somewhat dry, the performance was rewarded with enthusiastic applause and amply demonstrated that Gruber and Muthspiel's orchestration simply cannot be bettered. It succeeds brilliantly in making one of Weill's best and most attractive scores available for wider exposure and enjoyment across the world.

Philip Headlam
Berlin



Ensemble Modern takes a bow as conductor HK Gruber lifts the score

PHOTO: ENSEMBLE MODERN/AVONGE BERGMANN

One Touch of Venus

Staatsoperette Dresden

Premiere: 22 June 2019

Productions of *One Touch of Venus* are a rarity even in Germany, where Weill's Broadway musicals enjoy many more large-scale productions than in the United States. None of Weill's musicals, however, is as cheekily American or as unequivocally a musical comedy as *Venus*. With countless topical references peppering Ogden Nash's fiendishly witty lyrics, *Venus* (premiered in 1943) presents unique challenges. Yet in a lively new German translation by Roman Hinze, directed by Matthias Davids, *One Touch of Venus* again proves its sophistication, stage-worthiness, and skillful exploitation of musical comedy conventions. In 2011, Hinze and Davids mounted their first Weill collaboration, *Lady in the Dark*, at Hannover Staatsoper, creating a production that brilliantly solved the piece's theatrical challenges, and *Ein Hauch von Venus* proves a worthy and fascinating successor.

To appreciate the achievement of Hinze and Davids, one must first grasp the subtlety of the German title. "Hauch" denotes less a tactile sensation than a breeze, whiff, or waft. Its insubstantiality heralds the production's skillful and subtle oscillations between gods and mortals, highbrow and lowbrow, farce and melodrama, new art and classical art—as well as the title character's simultaneous negotiation of passivity (as art object) and agency (her impetuous management of the action). As Venus, Johanna Spantzel is not the marmoreal, docile beauty depicted in classical sculpture (or the Hollywood musical version) but a gutsy magician with a mezzo-soprano that skillfully navigates some of Weill's most memorable songs. The production, moreover, eschews archeological reconstruction in favor of a present-tense *mise-en-scène* whose costumes (by Judith Peter) pay homage to the brassy fashions of the 1940s and 1950s while bearing more than a whiff of contemporary style. The challenge of engineering quick scene changes is met by Hans Kudlich's fluidly modular, if anodyne, unit set, with mobile ramps and stairways, which is framed by two false prosceniums whose changing colors suggest the neon glitter of Times Square (or Las Vegas).

The rest of the cast matches Spantzel's flair, particularly Christian Grygas (Whitelaw Savory) and Jannik Harneit (Rodney Hatch). The balletic choreography (by Francesc Abós), like the staging, manages the oscillation between new and classic, especially in a thrillingly ridiculous, cowboy-inspired "Way Out West in Jersey," a Dickensian "Doctor Crippen," and a neo-classical "Bacchanale." The large chorus, nine-person *corps de ballet*, and Staatsoperette orchestra turn in consistently skillful, idiomatic performances. German directors and conductors sometimes betray a surprising unfamiliarity and unease with Broadway style, but Davids and the musical director, Peter Christian Feigel, understand both the lullaby of Broadway and its syncopated hustle, and they manage to impart these qualities to all participants. Kurt Weill's score is one of his most witty, and the ample orchestral forces luxuriate in his orchestrations while also capturing the unmistakable if distant echoes of *Mahagonny* and *Happy End*.

The Hinze/Davids production of *Venus* sticks closely to the



Venus (Johanna Spantzel) and Rodney (Jannik Harneit) in Act II

PHOTO: KAI-UWE SCHULTE-BUNERT

original script and incorporates nearly all of Weill's score (some of the ballet music is cut, most regrettably, "Venus in Ozone Heights"). The translation of the spoken text is relatively straightforward, but the songs prove a much greater challenge. Hinze changed some now-obscure topical references to make them recognizable to German audiences (for example, Don Ameche to Marlon Brando, Ozone Heights to Staten Island) but often had to reconceive and simplify Nash's witticisms and wordplay. This inevitably comes at a price, but there are also moments when the German text is in fact more clever and precise than the English.

A more daunting challenge for any production is wrestling with the politics of the piece. *One Touch of Venus* epitomizes a historical moment during World War II when women on the home front (think Rosie the Riveter) became formidable social and economic actors, as Venus does. By the war's end, a revival of domesticity pushed women out of the workplace and back into the home while couples were urged to settle in cozy new cookie-cutter suburbs—like Ozone Heights. Venus's panicked flight in the second act from suburbia back to Olympus thus represents a scandalous assault on what, a few years after the premiere, would be hailed as a new utopia. The piece remains ambivalent about Venus's self-determination; in the final scene, she seems to capitulate to domesticity in the form of a new, all-too-human avatar (from Ozone Heights!) who exits arm-in-arm with Rodney as the curtain falls. In the Staatsoperette production, however, Davids engineers a more ambivalent ending in which Rodney and Venus exchange a bemused glance from across the stage as "Speak Low" crests in the orchestra. This subtle reworking points up Davids's ingenuity at fashioning what he calls a "gentle updating" of the piece, which actually recovers its relevance, contemporaneity, and emotional heft.

David Savran
CUNY Graduate Center

Violin Concerto

Philharmonia Orchestra
Christian Tetzlaff, violin
Esa-Pekka Salonen, conductor

29 September 2019

One of the most enterprising aspects of Esa-Pekka Salonen's long tenure as Principal Conductor and Artistic Adviser of London's Philharmonia Orchestra has been his practice each season of building a series of concerts and cross-cultural events that focus on a specific area of repertory. This year's series, running between June and September 2019, was entitled "Weimar Berlin: Bittersweet Metropolis—Music, Film and Drama for Turbulent Times" with the spotlight placed firmly on music written during the Weimar Republic. In fact, the orchestral programs conducted by Salonen included music composed before 1919 and after 1933. Furthermore, the final concert's title, "The Party's Over," proved somewhat misleading, since none of the featured works actually dated from the early 1930s, when the Weimar Republic was on the verge of collapse.

Still, such historical inaccuracies shouldn't undermine what proved to be one of the most enterprising and imaginative programs heard in recent years at the Royal Festival Hall. The first half of the concert was particularly intriguing, since it allowed listeners to hear music by Busoni side by side with some of the finest orchestral music of his star pupil, Kurt Weill—a fascinating combination. Busoni's *Two Studies for Doktor Faust*, which opened the evening, remains grievously neglected in the concert hall, and it was wonderful to hear it played with such authority and sophistication. Salonen opted for a moderately fast and flowing tempo for the mournful "Sarabande." But the interpretation was sufficiently shaped to allow the necessary space for Busoni's luminous orchestration to blossom. The ensuing "Cortège" is a much trickier proposition, dominated by constantly driving dance rhythms, which in this context uncannily anticipate similar ostinato patterns in Weill's musical armory. Busoni's work requires exemplary precision of ensemble to make its full impact, and it's good to report that the Philharmonia rose to the occasion triumphantly, delivering a performance of breathtaking virtuosity and stunning textural clarity.

The large stage of the Royal Festival Hall is perhaps not ideally suited to the lean and angular wind orchestra accompaniment in Weill's Violin Concerto. In truth, it took a little bit of time for Christian Tetzlaff and the Philharmonia to adapt fully to the problematic acoustic. But once the dynamic and textural parameters had been established, the performance managed admirably to project the urgency, emotional intensity, and dynamism of Weill's score, and the audience was hypnotically drawn into the composer's unique sound world. Of course, Tetzlaff was not exactly coming to the work for the first time, having made a very fine commercial recording twenty-five years ago. On this particular occasion, however, he opted to perform the solo part with the music in front of him. This did not prove to be a barrier since it was evident from the very outset that Tetzlaff had a clear

understanding of the Concerto's theatrical trajectory, from the nightmarish and expressionistic opening movement through the disturbing sequence of quasi-militaristic dances in the second, culminating in the helter-skelter rush of adrenaline in the finale. Given Tetzlaff's utterly compelling delivery of the violin part, it is little wonder that the audience was totally won over both by the performance and the work.

In the second half of the program Salonen gave us one of his repertoire favorites, the *Lulu* Suite by Berg, followed by a comparative rarity, Hindemith's *Dances from Das Nusch-Nuschi*. Once again, the clarity and precision of orchestral playing paid tremendous dividends in bringing Berg's complex and emotionally overwrought score to life, and Rebecca Nelsen proved to be an alluring soloist, whether in her sensuous projection of the "Lied der Lulu" or in the heartfelt declaration of love from the Countess Geschwitz that closes the Suite. After such an overwhelming musical experience, the grotesqueries of Hindemith's *Dances* offered necessary relief. Salonen and the orchestra certainly let their hair down with a bitingly incisive performance, though the composer's direction for the third and final piece "to be danced (or rather wobbled to) by two eunuchs with incredibly fat stomachs" would surely not pass muster in today's politically correct world.

Erik Levi
London

From the program note by Paul Griffiths:

"The work's scoring, for an orchestra of wind instruments, timpani, percussion, and double basses, parallels on a smaller scale that of Stravinsky's Concerto for Piano and Wind, but since Weill was already at work on his concerto when Stravinsky's had its premiere, this would seem to be coincidental, resulting from both composers' desire for clean lines and a break from Romantic plush. This is not to say, though, that Stravinsky was not on the young Weill's horizon."

From a review by Paul Driver:

"I was veritably blown out of my seat in the front stalls of the Royal Festival Hall, most notably by the violin concerto, the young Kurt Weill's op. 12, scored for an orchestra of winds, percussion, and double basses . . . The dazzling three-movement essay of 1924 has a strangeness of form and eclectic content, yet, in this performance at least, an instant rightness. Tetzlaff's spiccato brilliance was something to behold, and all the players contributed to a chamber-musical high alertness." (The Sunday Times, 6 October 2019)

Mackie Messer: Brechts 3 Groschenfilm

Joachim A. Lang, director

DVD (region 2) and Blu-ray (region B) released by New KSM Cinema

Mackie Messer joins a small handful of screen versions of *Die Dreigroschenoper* that began with G.W. Pabst's *3-Groschen-Oper* in 1931. Yet like one of the episodes in the German television series *Babylon Berlin* (see review in the Spring 2018 *Newsletter*), it is more than a cinematic rendering of *Die Dreigroschenoper*; it is also a story about it.

The movie opens with two written statements explaining its broader purpose and ends with a moment of sobering historical contextualization. Just before the cameras film Macheath (Tobias Moretti) intoning the misanthropic dictums of the "Second Threepenny Finale" at the protracted and rancorous dress rehearsal, we hear a snatch of delicate underscoring (woodwinds, harp, and evocative French horns) accompanying the two statements. First comes the rhetorical question that Brecht posed in Danish exile: "How should art move people, if it is itself not moved by the fate of mankind?" "This film," the second statement then informs us, "tells the story of a film never made; it lends the artists their voice: a young, wild collective that raises big social issues with its art, and creates an international hit." It also claims a level of authenticity rarely evinced by regular biopics: "Everything that Brecht says in this film is based on quotations from his work and life." The same, by the way, goes for the handful of lines Weill is given.

The film's title reflects a hagiographic emphasis on Brecht, played by stogie-puffing Lars Eidinger, whose pronouncements have an affinity—in form, if not content—with the rapid-fire, perfectly phrased aphorisms of an Oscar Wilde play. By contrast, Weill (Robert Stadlober) gormlessly grins his way through the entire movie, exhibiting a mix of wonder and self-satisfaction at his newfound success. Among the handful of published texts excerpted for his dialogue are the droll response he gave to the questionnaire "My Wife" (1929) and the earnest "Correspondence Concerning 'Threepenny Opera'" (1928).

A stubborn fidelity to the numerous musical and textual sources lends the enterprise a decidedly didactic air, which only intensifies toward the end. As the political situation of the early 1930s becomes existentially precarious and Brecht applies his lapidary tone to the purposes of agitprop, Weill's music is augmented by Hanns Eisler's "Song of a Proletarian Mother" and "March of the Calves." Both of these numbers are sung by Brecht's wife, Helene Weigel (Meike Droste), who also plays the title role in an interpolated scene from Brecht's contemporaneous *St. Joan of the Stockyards*. Earlier in the film, room is found for Carola Neher (Hannah Herzsprung) to sing "Surabaya-Johnny" (from *Happy End*), during which Brecht and Weill hold forth defending their art against its "industrialization," and for the sentimental nineteenth-century piano piece "The Maiden's Prayer" (featured

in *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*), which serves as background music in Jenny's brothel.

Among several instances of the obscure stuff of scholarly footnotes being pressed into service in the screenplay is the critical scene of a site visit to the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm by the jury presiding over the lawsuit. Borrowing lines from *Happy End* that were later added to *Dreigroschenoper*, Macheath appeals to the court with his oft-cited peroration: "What is a picklock compared with a share certificate? What is breaking into a bank compared with founding a bank?" etc. "These lines were not in the premiere," an irked attorney objects, "they don't belong to the piece." Macheath counters, channeling Brecht: "But these lines are the future. They will last." As indeed they did, in the playwright's 1931 revision.

On the basis of a deep dive into such a vast array of primary and secondary sources, writer/director Joachim A. Lang delivers a multilayered meta-work that adopts what the late Daniel Albright, in his book *Untwisting the Serpent*, called a "horizontal approach" (i.e., an approach that treats the elements of a work separately as they evolved over time rather than together as a coherent, "vertical" whole). According to Albright, "some Modernist collaborations were always intended to be understood horizontally—and perhaps can even be read better in retrospect, as sets of isolated components." His prime example is Satie's "ballet réaliste" *Parade*, a "spectacle in which the constituent arts refuse to fit together into transmediating chords." Albright is speaking figuratively in terms of the "consonance" and "dissonance" of a media montage, with creative contributions by Satie, Cocteau, Picasso, and Massine. *Die Dreigroschenoper* is hardly such an extreme case, and the dissonance among its various parts is frequently lauded, at least in theory, as a key ingredi-



ent of the “epic” style. Regarding “The Pimp’s Ballad,” for example, the composer wrote (and proclaims almost verbatim in the movie) that “the charm of the piece rests precisely in the fact that a rather risqué text ... is set to music in a gentle, pleasant way.” The dissonant counterpoint between text and music—Albright calls it “coordinated incongruity”—was part of the point.

As with *Parade*, however, the separation of elements facilitated by the modular design of *Dreigroschenoper* was abundantly realized over time, opening up all manner of “horizontal” perspectives: between score and popular arrangements, the 1928 libretto and Brecht’s 1931 revision, the play with music and the Pabst film, etc., including the collaborators’ theoretical statements, above all Brecht’s oft-cited “Notes” that accompanied his revision and continue to inform both staging and critical exegesis. All of this has led to the collaboration that produced *Die Dreigroschenoper* being understood “horizontally.” And just as Albright understands *Parade* in this way to the point of being able to call it “a profound response not only to the Great War, but also to avant-garde art, from within avant-garde art,” so Lang presents Brecht’s complex of *Dreigroschen* materials as an analogously profound response to the artistic and political culture of the late Weimar Republic.

Mackie Messer is made to work on several interlocking levels: there is the biographical layer with the verbally stylized interactions among the members of the collective, whether with one another or with representatives of the financially motivated film company. Another level comprises scenes from the musical theater work itself, lavishly presented either as re-creations of the original production at Schiffbauerdamm in Berlin or as imagined footage of a film that Brecht and his collaborators intended to derive from their smash-hit stage work. Some of these “never made” portions recall Pabst in visual details, if not in atmosphere, among them the shot with Mac’s and Polly’s reflections superimposed over shop-window mannequins; others are drawn from Brecht’s own scenario and related materials, including the playwright’s *Threepenny Novel* and his media-studies tract on the celebrated court case, *The Threepenny Trial: A Sociological Experiment*—a lawsuit that he heroically lost. All of these sources are duly acknowledged in the extensive final credits. Lastly, there

are enactments of political censorship and violence, one of which depicts the screenplay of the unmade movie engulfed in flames as the object of a book burning, with Brecht (in a recording from 1939) reading his celebrated poem about “sinister times,” *An die Nachgeborenen*.

Like Ingmar Bergman in his celebrated film of Mozart’s *Magic Flute*, Lang combines elements of opera-film, as if an actual stage production were being captured cinematically, and Zeffirelli-like film-opera that showcases realistic urban locations evocative of nineteenth-century London. Art and life become further intermingled as Brecht’s personal life with Elisabeth Hauptmann, Helene Weigel, and Carola Neher dovetails with the musical numbers. A striking example of such dovetailing is the motivic transition, both musically and thematically, from Jenny (Britta Hammelstein) singing “Ballad of Sexual Dependency” to a scene in which Brecht and Hauptmann are taking a road trip in his Steyr. Brecht, who is simultaneously driving his prized automobile and making unwanted advances to his female passenger, imagines aloud a film scene, which is then played out on screen, featuring Macheath at a countryside picnic among his semi-clad “shady ladies,” one of whom will deliver the “Judas kiss.” Distracted at the wheel by his own sexual dependency, Brecht crashes the car, leaving Hauptmann to tighten one of the wheel’s lug nuts, while he writes up the experience for publication as a magazine photo-story. (The playwright does not appear to break his kneecap, however, as he did in the real-life crash.)

Critical reception of the film has been mixed, the principal bone of contention being the extent to which *Mackie Messer* wears its considerable learning on its sleeve. Whereas some critics have praised the director’s critical intelligence, others have found the film, in the words of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, “overloaded to the point of fatigue.” The overload is twofold: informational and aesthetic. Lang has turned his seemingly boundless admiration for Brecht into a history lesson—a lesson, moreover, that overwhelms the senses with all manner of visual and aural stimuli, including a substantial amount of dance and vibrant underscoring. The big band and orchestra of Southwest German Radio play brilliantly throughout under the characteristically vital direction of HK Gruber.

Of *Die Dreigroschenoper*, Weill wrote that it gave him “the opportunity to make opera the subject matter for an evening in the theater,” something that he and other members of the “young, wild collective” did in the spirit of a pared-down neoclassicism. With *Brecht’s 3Groschenfilm*, by contrast, Lang takes a legendary evening in the theater and its aftermath as the opportunity to pay homage to Brecht’s legacy with a lush production.

Stephen Hinton
Stanford University



PHOTO: STEPHAN PICK

Elisabeth Hauptmann (Peri Baumeister), Kurt Weill (Robert Stadlober) and Bertolt Brecht (Lars Eidinger) in the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm