

Kurt Weill Newsletter

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FEATURES

Not Your Grandfather's *Threepenny Opera* at the National Theatre

Lost in the Stars at Washington National Opera

The Threepenny Opera returns to its London roots on 26 May 2016, when a new English adaptation officially opens at the National Theatre. The team of Rufus Norris (stage director), David Shrubsole (music director), and Simon Stephens (adaptor) presides over the new production in the Olivier Theatre. The National has not taken up *Threepenny* since 1986, when the creative team consisted of Peter Wood (director), Dominic Muldowney (music director), and Robert David MacDonald (translator); Tim Curry played Macheath. This year, some of London's leading actors take principal roles: Rory Kinnear (Macheath), Rosalie Craig (Polly), Nick Holder (Mr. Peachum), Haydn Gwynne (Mrs. Peachum), and Sharon Small (Jenny); Vicki Mortimer designs the sets and Imogen Knight choreographs. The creative team promises “filthy language and immoral behaviour,” but that is only the half of it. The production offers an incisive, brand-new English rendering of dialogue and lyrics, a reimagining of the characters of this classic of musical theater, Weill's original scoring performed by seven band members (just as in the 1928 world premiere), and a head-turning new staging masterminded by a committed group of seasoned professionals. A total of 82 performances are scheduled through October. Brace yourself, London, for . . .

Not Your Grandfather's *Threepenny Opera* A Daring New Production at the National

One of the hottest directors in British theater has teamed up with one of the most successful playwrights. Rufus Norris, Artistic Director of the National Theatre, and Simon Stephens, Olivier Award-winning dramatist, never wavered in their determination to rework the text of *The Threepenny Opera* and make it more coherent onstage. Their efforts have yielded an entirely new book and lyrics that compel us to see the characters through new eyes, rethink certain moments in the plot, and weigh Brecht's theories of politics and drama and how they might be useful (or otherwise) in the context of a new production.

The Book

Rufus Norris explained that “we are trying to strengthen the script in dramaturgical terms. Simon Stephens and I wanted very much to work the book as much as we could to increase the jeopardy within it, to find another couple of layers.” Stephens noted that they tried to “imbue the characters with psychological motivation. That will make the work, the entire experience, more dramatic.” It involved rethinking the characters along with crucial moments in the plot, as Stephens pointed out when he discussed the least realistic moment in *Threepenny*: the ending. Macheath, doomed to be hanged, receives a completely unexpected pardon from the Queen (King, in this production). The forced happy ending was used quite deliberately by Brecht and Weill to make a point about opera and drama more generally. But what happens when you take the ending seriously and make it fit within dramatic conventions of plausibility? The answer is onstage at the National Theatre. Stephens gave us a foretaste: “The *deus ex machina* at the end of the play—the messenger from the King—we've tried to ground that in a way that has a kind of plausibility, to make that a thing that could actually happen. It's quite plausible, because it's become an interrogation of the corruption of power.” Music director David Shrubsole elaborated: “Mack has got dirt on the king. So when he's at his last, he says to Polly, ‘deliver the envelope.’ Things are that desperate, that he can pull out the pink envelope for our ‘important friend from Windsor.’” Macheath a blackmailer? Now there's a plausible characterization!

“I remain pretty loyal to Brecht and Weill in terms of narrative, character, action, location.”

—Simon Stephens

How far can one go in reworking such a familiar play? Stephens noted that it's not a free-for-all. “I remain pretty loyal to Brecht and Weill in terms of narrative, character, action, location. I've not changed the story. I've not added characters or taken characters away.” As Norris put it, “We're trying to muscle it up a bit so that people aren't just waiting for the next song to come along, and they actually care about the story.”

The Women

So often, *The Threepenny Opera* is presented as a conflict between protagonist Macheath and antagonist Mr. Peachum (or maybe it's the other way around). Simon Stephens acknowledged that “the women in *Threepenny Opera* are quite two-dimensional. We've tried to make them real characters with psychological depth.” Three central women characters: Polly Peachum, Mrs. Peachum, and Jenny. They all sing, and they all have important places in the plot, none more than Polly, who steps effortlessly into Mack's shoes when he must flee London, but who in most productions returns to subordinate status as soon as he returns. Norris, Shrubsole, and Stephens decided to reimagine these essential roles. Norris pointed out that “Mrs. Peachum's line through the piece is not entirely clear from the original, and it can go in a number of different ways,” making it imperative to bolster that role and make her a more compelling character. Meanwhile, Stephens rhapsodized over Polly: “more central to our adaptation almost than Mack is. You could almost call the show ‘Polly Peachum.’ She's a magnificent character.”

Shrubsole added a musical perspective on the female roles: “There's been a complete political revolution in how women use their voices since 1928. Those upper registers were the ranges women sang in without mics in 1928 to get over a band; that's just what you had to do. In today's musical theater, nearly all women sing a fifth lower than where Weill was writing. In 2016, a woman's upper register generally denotes class, or some particular beauty or eloquence or romanticism.” Transposing the songs was not an option, and Shrubsole acknowledged the challenge of casting the roles, while in the same breath praising the actors: “Polly

is articulate, and she comes out on top. We have the amazing Rosalie Craig, who's got extraordinary vocal facility. 'Barbara-Song'—all of her songs—she handles in an absolutely appropriate style. Haydn Gwynne (Mrs. Peachum) has a stridency about her. Sharon Small is playing Jenny. She's got such a fragility in her voice, which makes 'Surabaya-Johnny' and 'Solomon-Song' so poignant."

The Theories

Whenever *Threepenny Opera* comes up in conversation, it won't be long before someone mentions "epic theater" or "alienation" (a less than ideal translation of *Verfremdung*) or another of Brecht's ideas about drama. Some directors in the past have seemed to use *Threepenny* more as an occasion to work out a particular reading of Brechtian theory than as a work standing on its own. It's safe to say that the National Theatre is not proceeding that way. Naturally, Norris and Stephens have done their homework and understand the many ways that Brecht has shaped modern theater. Norris pointed to a "presentational demand" in *Threepenny*, but he also noted that Brecht believed that theater should be as popular as a soccer match. No audience will enjoy a work entirely on a theoretical level, and Norris sees his job as honoring different levels of the work: "some people say you should set out to do Brecht in a way that makes the audience uncomfortable, in a very confrontational way. But I think he was an entertainer as well."

Simon Stephens admires Brecht because he "celebrated the actuality of the stage and the performer. Brecht was unapologetic about acknowledging that theater depends on the presence of actors." Brecht was "as prolific a theorist as he was an artist. And even better, sometimes the theory and the art contradicted one another." As he worked, Stephens concentrated on Brecht the dramatist rather than Brecht the theorist. "I ask myself: What's he trying to make out of this moment? What's he trying to make out of this scene? And I recognize myself in him. Dramatist to dramatist, toe-to-toe, recognizing each other. That's a joy."

Weill and Brecht both expressed opinions about how the songs ought to be handled and whether they are intended to be set apart from the rest of the action by lighting, positioning of actors onstage, etc., or delivered without emotion. It seems like an essential question for any piece of musical theater, but David Shrubsole begged to differ. "As somebody who's going to put the piece into practice for an audience, my academic opinion doesn't really matter, because it's what serves the story, what serves Weill, the score, at each moment. The function changes from one song to the next. Take the 'Liebeslied.' It's a beautiful melody in quite a cynical and jaded piece. So what's the tone there? Are we asking Rory and Rosalie to sell that, like it's from *Oklahoma*? Look, that feels inappropriate. But you can't be completely cold about it either. So that's a question of nuance and tone and degree. But also, in the 'Call from the Grave' ['Ruf aus der Gruft'], he's

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—David Shrubsole

begging. You can't have Macheath not plead for his life at the end. You can't ask him not to be convincing or believable there. But then the three finales do require the action to stop, and everyone has to step out of character and sing. It's absolutely case-by-case."

Each production must settle the case of theory vs. practice in its own way. Shrubsole summed up the National Theatre's goals: "I don't think any of us ever want the audience to sit there and say, 'That's interesting; I see what they've done there. They've thought about that a lot.' Chin-scratching isn't what we want the audience to do. We want it to be engaging."

The Politics

Experts may disagree about how doctrinaire a Marxist Brecht was in 1928, or about his political aims in *The Threepenny Opera*. The National Theatre team was not blind to the political implications of the work, and they teased out the problems quite thoroughly. One problem is built in. Rufus Norris recognized the "socialist pulse running through it," but he added, "The politics are not necessarily borne out narratively in the story." What Norris called the "agitprop voice" may not sit so well with audiences, particularly when laid on too thick. All three collaborators understood that in-your-face poverty and references to the exploitation of the poor and defenseless may come between the audience and the work. David Shrubsole summarized the issue: "In 2016, we're liberal actors and audience and no one has any relationship with real poverty or hunger. If you're doing lyrics about, 'Feed us first, then you can judge us,' well, you can do that, that's historically interesting, but there's no real communion between audience and cast. That's been an interesting thing that Rufus and Simon and I have grappled with, how you handle the tone so there is a real dialogue, rather than a slightly gauche, pretend one."

On another level, there is the relation between the show, which revels in depictions of poverty, and the Olivier Theatre, which Norris praised as "one of the wealthiest theaters in the world, with the most resources of any theater in the U.K." There is no question that staging *Threepenny* at the Olivier opens up

all sorts of production possibilities, and the team has been smacking its lips. David Shrubsole described the Overture as staged during rehearsals: "Somebody comes out of a trap door, goes to a winch, down comes a rope, he puts it into a hole in the floor, starts winching, and the whole band comes up on the stairway, playing the overture." It seems safe to say that no one has ever launched *Threepenny* like that before. But what about the contrast between the opulence of the theater and the opera for beggars? To their credit, Norris and Shrubsole freely acknowledged the problem without claiming to have found a solution. Norris, in fact, regarded it as one of his biggest challenges. "To do something called *The Threepenny Opera* on the Olivier stage is a contradiction in terms." Attend a performance to see how they've solved it.



Rufus Norris on the set

PHOTO: RICHARD HUBERT SMITH

Simon Stephens on the art of translation and adaptation

“With this play in particular, you have to take into account the sheer number of layers it goes through. It starts with a script by John Gay. Then Elisabeth Hauptmann translates that (or anyway, the version running in London in 1928) into German and then works with Brecht and Weill, who refine it in the course of their collaboration. And now it’s gone through the hands of Susan Momoko Hingley, who has prepared a literal English translation. Then I change it all around and give it to Rufus Norris. He gives it to our actors, and they give it to the audience.

“For me, translation means taking something from one language and rendering it in another language. And I’ve not done that; I don’t have sufficient German. I’m taking a literal translation and wrestling it into dramatic language. It’s slippery work. It’s slippery and it’s imprecise. I think the only thing we can do is acknowledge the slipperiness, the imprecision, rather than hankering to get a perfect translation from one play written in one language to the same play written in another language.

“It’s not like I’m some kind of medium, simply channeling Brecht’s voice from beyond the grave. It’s a complicated series of conversations. I’m like a switchboard operator in an old movie, putting through telephone calls. ‘Mr. Brecht, Mr. Norris is on the line. Mr. Norris, Mr. Kinnear is on the line.’ I’m not the authority or the definitive voice. It’s never that I’ll get something right, but I’ll *try* to get something right. And actually theater, for me, exists in the attempt as much as anything. It’s not about purity, at all. Theater’s not born out of precision, but it’s born out of a kind of faith in communication. And I think Brecht and Weill were great practitioners of a theater of faith.

“What was important for me linguistically was that every word needed to be speakable in 2016, but also theoretically speakable in 1928. I didn’t want references to iPhones and Snapchat and Whatsapp, and all that. So what I was searching for is a kind of timelessness in the language. The East End of London, which is where I live and where the play is set, is beautiful because the people there on a Saturday night now are fundamentally the same people that were there a hundred years ago. I wanted to try for that kind of timeless quality.

“Finally, songs and scenes are profoundly different. For me, scenes are about capturing the energy of behavior as characters



Simon Stephens at work

PHOTO: RICHARD HUBERT SMITH

try to affect one another and the audience. And because it’s about capturing an energy, linguistic precision is less fundamental. You can be more approximate because sometimes an accurate adaptation of the energy requires a change in language. Necessarily, the music requires a much more ferocious precision. And, so sometimes when I’m working on a scene, I can just watch the actors, and I can do it very quickly. A song you can’t translate quickly. What we did with translating the songs—and I worked very closely with David Shrubsole on this—was we sat in the same room, and we’d work for about four hours every day, and we’d get one song translated. You have to get the scansion right, the intention right. The rhyme structure and the rhythm structure have to match the music. And it has to be listenable and singable.”

David Shrubsole:

“I’ve been working very closely with Simon Stephens, advising on rhythm, stress, vowels, and I’ve been very strict with him. As a composer myself, I’ve insisted on preserving certain things—the rhythm is part of the DNA and you can’t just add syllables that aren’t there in the musical phrase. That dilutes Weill’s thematic compositional strengths. So in one of the act finales, in an early reading the actor kept wanting to change the rhythm. And, in the end it wasn’t the actor, it was the lyric. You’ve got to write a lyric that makes that rhythm happen. It needs to be iambic, or whatever. So often the work has been twofold. That’s the wrong vowel, or that’s the wrong meter, because it’s making the singer want to do something else. Rhythm—this is my own personal opinion—rhythm is absolutely as important as melody for compositional unity. So we have to find a way that feels natural for the singer to sing it in that rhythm. I don’t ever want it to feel like it’s a strait-jacket. But it has to be that rhythm.

“One of the things I love about being a musical director and also having some composition experience and some lyric experience and some orchestration experience is all those things cross-pollinate, so I have the knowledge and the confidence to say, ‘No, we can find a better rhyme for that. It’s a convenient rhyme; you can hear it coming.’ Take the first verse of the ‘Kanonen-Song’ that we were grappling with the other day. I came up with four, five different options for it. But it was the sixth one I came up with and said, ‘That one works. That is the clearest and the rhyme does completely amplify the sense.’ So, that’s been a very exciting, joyous part of it.”



David Shrubsole
in rehearsal

PHOTO: RICHARD HUBERT SMITH

David Shrubsole worked with Rufus Norris on the groundbreaking musical *London Road* in 2012. His distinguished career encompasses gigs as vocal arranger, orchestrator, music director, and composer. *American Psycho*, for which he prepared the vocal arrangements, has recently moved from the West End to Broadway. His contributions to *The Threepenny Opera* go well beyond working with the orchestra and singers; he played an essential role in preparing the English lyrics as well.

The Band

It takes a lot of nerve in this day and age to play the *Threepenny* score the way it was done originally, with only seven players on 23 instruments. At the world premiere in 1928, Weill chose the band, worked closely with the musicians, and even composed the score with their particular capabilities in mind. That was then, and no one plays *Threepenny* that way any more. Until now. No doubt the text will get more attention, but the National Theatre is doing something equally radical with the score, not by changing it but by restoring it. Music director David Shrubsole commented on some of the striking musical features of this production:

“Our percussionist has spent the last eighteen months learning the trumpet. Sarah, who plays both guitar and violin, has learned the cello. Christian, one of our sax players, is Head of Saxophone Studies at The Guildhall School of Music, so he is one of the best saxophone players in the country. In this score saxophone doubles bassoon, which is unheard of in the U.K. I was a bassoonist in a former life, so he actually has my bassoon at the moment and has been working away on learning that part.

“One of the exciting things that Rufus and I, and Imogen Knight, the choreographer, have said from the beginning is ‘let’s make the music completely integral to the staging.’ So the band at certain times is onstage, in costume, playing from memory, alongside the actors. We’re planning to do the ‘Second Threepenny Finale’ with the entire acting company and the band in a line, playing and singing, walking downstage very slowly. So you’ve got actor next to trombone next to saxophone. In other numbers, when people need to change instruments, there’s an actor next to them with the instrument they’re about to change to. And they pass it to them and take the other instrument. In the ‘Ballad of Lust and Desire’ [‘Ballade von der sexuellen Hörigkeit’], our Mrs. Peachum, Haydn Gwynne, who was in the original cast of *Billy Elliott* in London and on Broadway, sings at the top of a stairway. The melody is doubled on tenor saxophone, and he sits next to her. In the brothel scene, the band is right there in the midst of it. It’s not just that the band is onstage; when it works dramatically, we’ve made them part of the action.”

A New Song

Another musical innovation was introduced later in the process. With the permission of the Weill and Brecht estates, the triumvirate decided to interpolate underscoring based on the “Song of Mandalay” as well as “Surabaya-Johnny” (from *Happy End*). Kim Kowalke noted that Jenny’s appropriation of Polly’s wedding number, “Pirate Jenny,” which dates to the 1931 film version, has become iconic, and another solution must be found when the number is restored to Polly. Rufus Norris elaborated:

“Well, it’s quite a simple narrative thing, really, in that when I met with Kim Kowalke and we talked about the piece originally,

we talked about who should sing ‘Pirate Jenny.’ And I actually made quite a strong case for Jenny to sing it as our introduction to her at the beginning of Scene Five. We’ve waited quite a long time for this major character to turn up, and it didn’t seem right to us that the first time we hear her sing is in the ‘Tango’ [‘Zuhälterballade’], which is a duet, and we don’t get her on her own until she’s singing ‘Solomon-Song,’ near the end of the show. So it’s very important to me that Jenny have a song there, but then of course Polly normally sings ‘Pirate Jenny’ in Scene Two, and that’s our introduction to *her*. So, we had a bit of a back and forth. It hadn’t occurred to me that we could include something from *Happy End*, but Kim talked about solutions other directors had found for this problem, and he suggested that we might use “Surabaya-Johnny” if we could make a strong argument for including it. So Simon and I worked very hard on that, and that’s Jenny’s song at the beginning of Scene Five. We’re also going to use some instrumental bits, particularly ‘Mandalay’ and maybe one or two other bits just to give us a slightly broader palette to use through the piece.” Shrubsole adds, “For the fight near the end of the first half in the brothel, there wasn’t anything with the kinetic energy that we needed, so that’s why we’re using ‘Mandalay-Song’ for that.”

Excerpt from Act II, Scene 4

Mack In this book is a list of other people who owe me some favours.

Polly That sounds important. What’s the secret one?

Mack The secret one?

Polly There must be one big one.

Mack I don’t know what you’re talking about.

Polly There must be something that you’ve got over everybody. For you to stay out of trouble for so long. There must be one piece of knowledge.

Mack I use my skill, Polly.

Polly Don’t lie to me, Mack. If there’s one person in London you need to tell the truth to it’s me.

She looks at him. He thinks. He takes out a pink envelope.

Mack Here. In this envelope is information about a man who I am going to call Our Important Friend from Windsor. This is his real name.

He writes down a name. Shows it to her. She’s stunned.

Don’t say a word. To anybody. Ever.

Polly How did you get to meet him?

Mack We met during his time in the military. There was a period in his younger years when Our Important Friend from Windsor came to depend on me for what we might call his essentials. In the world he moves in his tastes can be rather exposing unless handled extremely carefully.

Polly I can imagine.

Mack He relied on my discretion. He’d let me watch him sometimes he was so very grateful. There is enough information in here on him to bring the whole country to its knees. Photographs. Signed contracts. Witness statements. Affidavits. There are no copies.

He puts it back where he got it from.

I keep this one with me.

Polly Mack, you’ll have to stay alert. Don’t get distracted by worrying about which one of the boys handed you in. And promise me you’re going to leave London as soon as you can.

Act III, Scene 9: "Call from the Grave"

Mack

Now listen closely to me and be brave
Here lies Macheath who's now been locked away
Not in a prison cell but in a grave
The curse of fate has brought him here today
And pray to God you hear his dying word
The thickest walls contain his body here
Will none amongst you pray for his sad soul?
He's nearly dead, you fucker, crack a beer
But please release him from this wretched hole
And let your stony hearts for once be stirred

Now come and see the mess he's living in
That's why he calls to you to give him cash
His fate is pissing on him with a grin
Don't let his body burn and turn to ash
Don't let him die alone without a friend
Go to His Majesty the King and pray
And beg him that he is fair and true and just
Then let your voices rise and sing this day
Or do you want my bones to dry to dust
And for my suffering to never end?



Rory Kinnear as Macheath (center) with the cast in rehearsal

PHOTO: RICHARD HUBERT SMITH

To learn more about the genesis and history of *The Threepenny Opera*, visit www.threepennyopera.org

Final Thoughts on *The Threepenny Opera*

Simon Stephens

From his Twitter account: "I have never had an infestation of ear-worm quite like that which *Threepenny Opera* has given me. Every tune is sublime. Exquisite tinnitus."

Rufus Norris

"Kurt Weill generally and this piece in particular have been massive influences for me. I am a huge Kurt Weill fan and the music for *Threepenny Opera* is some of my favorite music in the world. It's a cornerstone of one of the most important areas of the theater tradition. So it felt quite right that we should honor it."

David Shrubsole

"I know it and have loved it from way back. It speaks to me as a European musician, its harmony, its structure, and its use of dissonance. I enjoy going back to a score written in 1928 and seeing its DNA peppered through the following 90 years of music. Kander and Ebb, Sondheim, Duncan Sheik, or even Andrew Lloyd Webber all have *The Threepenny Opera*. It's very exciting to go back to the original score and hear how it's inspired generations of music theater composers."



Rufus Norris

PHOTO: RICHARD HUBERT SMITH

The Director's Coda

A final word from Rufus Norris, on his goals in programming *The Threepenny Opera* and his hopes for this production:

"Music was very much my way into the arts and I'm very keen for us at the National to have over the next few years a developed, three-dimensional relationship with the role of music within theater. There are several new musicals that we're developing. We've got one on stage at the moment, we've got another one going into rehearsal shortly. I think it's very important to have alongside that some of the major works that have influenced that tradition. There are a lot of composers and writers, but composers particularly, who might never have seen *Threepenny* and I would love for them to see it. It hasn't been done in London for a while.

"There are always purists who hark back to a production that they loved, and there are people who quite rightly are protective of the original with all these great works. If we can make a case for what we're trying to do, then I think people will accept it. And if we falter, then they will criticize us and probably rightly so. We're really not trying to reinvent the wheel and I really hope the baby doesn't go out with the bathwater. Yes, there are risks. It will all come down to how good it is."