

Building a model Mahagonny

David Drew hails a staging of Kurt Weill's *Mahagonny* that at last does justice to the composer's vision

So let us build a city here," sings Weill's and Brecht's Widow Begbick in Scene 1 of their operatic parable, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, "and call it Mahagonny, which means City of Nets." First revealed to the astonished burghers of Leipzig 62 years ago, *Mahagonny* survived the early scandals and enjoyed some two years of modest prosperity, before being wiped from the operatic map by political and cultural developments in the Germany of its day.

In the three-and-a-half decades since Brecht's death, the City of Nets has been erected and destroyed on innumerable stages throughout the world, but especially in Germany, where it soon became part of the iconography of a divided country. The damage it had been born with in 1930 — and which, indeed, was also part of its subject-matter — was as nothing compared to that which it now suffered in the two Germanys at the hands of those musically insolent directors who subscribed to the old Brechtian dogmas and instructed their servant-conductors accordingly. Dissenters — whose ancestry went back to the legendary Sadler's Wells production of 1963 — were either denounced or ignored.

Then came the "change" of November 1989. The great throngs that had earlier been peacefully demonstrating in Leipzig and other East German cities surely included a few hardy souls who had somewhere witnessed the less peaceable demonstrations that herald the fall of Mahagonny, and remembered the chorus's final admonishment: "Neither we nor you nor anyone can help a dead man."

The "death" of the GDR was bound, sooner or later, to affect the fortunes of Mahagonny and the kind of traffic that passed through it. But if there was anyone pre-eminently competent to recognise that drivers on either side of the road might at last have access to the walled-off centre of Mahagonny, it was surely Ruth Berghaus.

Apparently pre-destined for Mahagonny by her Berliner Ensemble training, Berghaus had, for many years, steadfastly refused to be lured into it by invitations from one side of the Wall or the other. Both as wife and as loyal widow of Paul Dessau — another of "Brecht's composers", but one still to be rescued from his posthumous clutches — she must have understood the dangers better than anyone. And so she had bided her time, and waited for Mahagonny's.

In Stuttgart, she has found the time, the place and the team; her new production is of epochal importance in the history of Weill's opera, and incidentally marks an auspicious start for the newly-appointed Dramaturg, Klaus Zehelein (whose predecessor, Peter Kehr, had left his distinguished mark on so much that has been achieved in Stuttgart in recent years). Courage and imagination of the sort required to mount such a *Mahagonny* at such a time are not only rare, but costly; and money is



Ruth Berghaus's exemplary *Mahagonny*: above, Reinhold Runkel as Widow Begbick, in front of the great stairway; right, Dagmar Pecková as the whore, Jenny

by no means as plentiful in the German theatre as it was.

"That is the city and here is its centre," proclaimed Reinhold Runkel's sensational Begbick from centre stage, legs astride, relentlessly confronting the audience beyond the footlights (small wonder that Runkel is so admired for her Herodias and her Clytemnestra). Scene 2 brought, in Dagmar Pecková, a Jenny to match Runkel's Begbick, and confirmed in its presentation of the "Mahagonny girls" that this was Berghaus's production and no-one else's. Dressed for school rather than dressed to kill, they entered in file from the top of the great Mahagonny-stairway, but as they descended, acquired a formation at first shark-like, then suggestive of some Roman trireme. Without preaching — and there was none to come — Berghaus had conflated the images of killer and of slave.

Meanwhile, something no less extraordinary had been happening in the orchestra pit, where, from the very opening bars, the young Markus Stenz had announced himself as an already outstanding opera conductor — or, for those in the audience who had heard him conducting the Berlin premiere of Henze's *Das verrottene Meer*, had confirmed that his musicality and his theatrical grip extend far beyond the field of "contemporary" music, and would surely serve him equally well in, say, Verdi or Stravinsky. How much he achieved with Weill's distinctive and tricky textures could only be suggested by detailed references to the score (not forgetting, here and there, some discreet



re-touchings which Weill himself would surely have endorsed). In the broader questions of phrasing and musico-dramatic articulation, Stenz's decisions invariably commanded respect, whether or not one agreed with them; and in crucial matters of tempo he was often exemplary, though sometimes — notably in the Act II tableaux — driven much too hard by the exigencies of the staging.

The notorious brothel scene was a case in point. Berghaus's basic idea was so brilliant and so simple that it defies description except in terms of the programme book's reprint of Marcuse's 1964 observations on the de-erotisation of modern society; but it was also so primitive, in a relevant sense, that its in-built repetitiveness contradicted the music's expressive and developmental functions, and quite literally "minimalised" them.

It was characteristic of the production that whereas the entire Jim-Jenny relationship was "de-erotised" by sundry devices comparable to the one on which the

brothel scene depended, its solitary yet immeasurably telling demonstration of a feeling at once erotic and lyrical was prompted by Begbick's memory of how she, too, had once stood by "a wall", and exchanged words with a man, including words of love.

From such insights, a production that distanced itself from Brecht without disloyalty to him, and distanced itself from the fallen Wall, without forgetting either it or its many human and political equivalents, achieved its ultimate impact on an audience that emerged from the premiere as astonished and overwhelmed as if the City of Nets had been discovered for the very first time that very evening.

And with it, a true star had also been discovered. The Romanian-born Gabriel Sadeh has, since 1984, been First Tenor in the New Israeli Opera. Making his debut in Stuttgart, he proved to be the Jim Mahoney of Weill's dreams. Amid the amply-deserved ovations for the

whole cast and for Berghaus and her team, those for Sadeh were of particular and discriminating intensity. His above all had been the voice of the City and its angered inhabitants.

In the end, however, it is not through any individual performance that this *Mahagonny* stands as a model and will endure as such, but rather through the strength of its architecture and its informing convictions. Once again Berghaus and her team — including her musical advisor, Frank Schneider — have built something new, from the ground up.

After the final Stuttgart performances this season (June 6 and June 16) there will be at least a dozen more during the 1992-3 season. No-one with an opportunity of visiting Berghaus's *Mahagonny* should allow themselves to miss it, whether they are already netted by preconceptions, or as free as Berghaus idealistically requires them to be.

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