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Weill on the Road to Broadway

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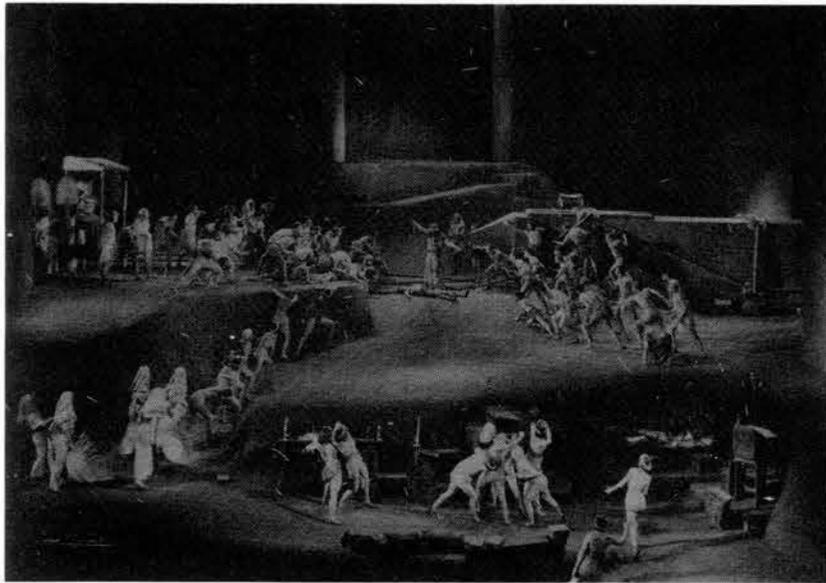


Photo Lucas-Pritchard

The Eternal Road, New York, 1937

Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York

Weill's first Atlantic crossing, in September 1935, was occasioned by Max Reinhardt's forthcoming production at the Manhattan Opera House of *The Eternal Road*, a four-act epic of the Jewish people, part biblical and part contemporary, with text by Franz Werfel and a score equivalent in dimensions to a full-length opera or oratorio. It was to have been a three-month stay, but financial and other problems arising from the indefinite postponement of the production obliged Weill to remain in America and earn his living as best he could. Not for a long while did he renounce all thought of returning to Europe, and it was only after some two years that he took the first steps towards acquiring American citizenship.

At the time of his arrival in America, Weill's reputation there was based almost entirely on the fame of *The Threepenny Opera*, which in turn derived from G. W. Pabst's film versions, from imported recordings and, last but not least, from the 1933 Broadway production. Although the latter was a box-office flop, and by all accounts thoroughly misconceived, it was seen and (as far as the music was concerned) greatly admired by most of the New York theatrical intelligentsia, together with that large if not dominant section of the League of Composers which in the New Deal era was more or less openly committed to the

political Left.

The solitary and characteristically cautious interview Weill granted to *New Masses* soon after his arrival in America shows a clear awareness of the pitfalls, as well as the opportunities, inherent in the very nature of his support at that time. By 1937, when he wrote (in German) the important essay 'Opera in America', he was already on firmer ground, and was looking to a broader public – not, however, to the Metropolitan Opera on the one hand or the Broadway public on the other, but rather to the aims and ideals of the Federal Theatre, a product of Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, influenced by the state-subsidized theatre systems of Europe, and especially by the socialist and social-democrat *Volksbühne* movements of Austria and Germany.

Although administered from Washington, the Federal Theatre naturally owed much to Broadway's progressive wing, and especially to those organizations which since the Wall Street crash of 1929 had been dedicated to one form or another of social theatre. Prominent among these was the Group Theatre, a radical offshoot of the Theater Guild. Founded in 1929 on the model of the Moscow Art Theatre, the Group Theatre had by 1935 established, under the leadership of Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman, and Cheryl Crawford, a strong identity and a loyal audience of its own. Just as the rather more tenuous Group Theatre of London was developing its house style through Auden and Isherwood – in whose work Weill was actively interested – so did its New York model adopt Clifford Odets as its 'house' dramatist (while preserving strong links with other young dramatists of similar persuasion).

Weill was close to Odets during the latter half of the 1930s, and discussed with him numerous theatre projects, without getting anywhere with any of them. (An 'opera' version of *Waiting for Lefty* was one of the projects that died on the branch – in fact their only formal collaboration was over an ill-fated Group Theatre film exploiting Ilya Ehrenburg's novel *The Loves of Jeanne Ney* as the basis for a plea on behalf of the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War).

For his first Group Theatre project, Weill suggested to Cheryl Crawford an American adaptation of Hašek's *Good Soldier Švejk* (which in Germany had occupied him for some while as an opera project). She welcomed the idea, and introduced him to Paul Green, a distinguished proponent of open-air theatre in his

native North Carolina, founder of an annual festival there, and a sworn enemy of Broadway.

After visiting Green in Chapel Hill, NC, in the spring of 1936, and working with him on the musico-dramatic outlines of *Johnny Johnson* – as the anti-war play was already called – Weill joined the Group Theatre at its annual summer camp in Connecticut, and there gave occasional lectures, while working with his usual intensity on the new score. With Lee Strasberg directing, and Lehman Engel conducting an Americanized *Threepenny Opera* band, *Johnny Johnson* opened at the 44th Street Theater in New York on 19 November 1936. In his opening-night cable of good wishes to Weill, Harold Clurman – close friend and associate of Aaron Copland – addressed Weill as ‘the greatest living theatre composer’.

It was chiefly as a ‘theatre composer’ – and certainly not as a composer of opera or concert music – that Weill was then known in the USA; and as such he was hailed by the New York theatre critics for his contribution to *Johnny Johnson*. The play itself was likewise well received by the press and by the Group Theatre devotees; but it was designed neither for the public that flocked to Broadway musicals nor for the middle-brow Theater Guild public. It was not until the Federal Theatre began sponsoring regional productions that *Johnny Johnson* was on the way to its present status as one of the classics of American music-theatre.

Weill’s second collaboration with Green, *The Common Glory*, was commissioned by the Federal Theatre, and was to have been a musical drama, part play, part pageant, and part popular oratorio, concerning the origins of the American Constitution. Having spent the first months of 1937 in Hollywood composing his scores for the (subsequently cancelled) Odets–Lewis Milestone film, and for a Fritz Lang film entitled *You and Me*, Weill returned to North Carolina in the late summer, to work with Green on *The Common Glory*. But because of Green’s slow and indecisive progress, a crucial deadline in December was passed, and Weill abandoned *The Common Glory* in favour of another project for the Federal Theatre – a musical version of the folk play *The Ballad of Davy Crockett* by the left-wing writer H. R. Hays (who was later to be associated with Brecht as translator).

Before returning to Hollywood in the spring of 1938 to finalize the two film scores and draft *Davy Crockett*, Weill discussed with his friend and neighbour Maxwell Anderson – at that time the most widely admired

American playwright after Eugene O’Neill – a musical play based on Washington Irving’s satire, *The History of New York by Diedrich Knickerbocker*. By the time he returned to New York in August 1938 he had written some twenty numbers for the Crockett play, while Anderson, to his considerable consternation, had not only completed the book and lyrics of *Knickerbocker Holiday*, but had arranged for a Broadway production in the autumn. Allowing for time spent on text revisions, casting discussions, and the like, Weill had about ten weeks in which to compose more than thirty numbers in vocal score, and about half as much again for making the orchestral score (which he always insisted on doing himself, contrary to Broadway practice before and since).

Staged by Joshua Logan, designed by Jo Mielziner, and conducted by Weill’s old friend and onetime pupil Maurice Abravanel, *Knickerbocker Holiday* reached Broadway (after an out-of-town try-out three weeks earlier) on 19 October 1938. Thanks both to Walter Huston’s winning performance as the embryonic dictator Pieter Stuyvesant, and to the well-matched skills of Weill and Anderson, the political message of *Knickerbocker Holiday* did not preclude a moderate box-office success. Weill had won a foothold on Broadway just in time: eight months later, after ‘investigations’ by the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the House Committee on Appropriations, the Federal Theatre, at the height of its success, was cruelly axed by Congress, a calculated snub to Roosevelt.



Photo Richard Tucker

Lady in the Dark, New York, 1941

Courtesy of the Yale University Music Library