

Kurt Weill Newsletter

VOLUME 39

NUMBER 2

FALL 2021



Interview with Director Barrie Kosky: Two New Productions in Berlin

Refresh Your Browser: The New kwf.org



Lotte Lenya Competition News

IN THIS ISSUE

- 2 Mid-Year Grant Recipients
- 3 Editor's Note
Kurt Weill Prize 2021
Fellow Conductors

FEATURES

- 4 Refresh Your Browser: The New kwf.org
- 6 Double Your Premieres, Double Your Fun: An Interview with Barrie Kosky

REVIEWS

Performances

- 11 *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*
Berliner Ensemble and Komische Oper Berlin
David Savran
- 13 *Die Dreigroschenoper*
Kammerspiele der Josefstadt
Nils Grosch
- 14 *Der Silbersee*
Opera Ballet Vlaanderen
Nicolas Blamont

NEWS

- 15 Wide World of Weill
- 16 Weill and Lenya News
- 19 All's Weill That Ends Well
Michael Lasser
- 21 Lotte Lenya Competition News
- 22 Lotte Lenya Competition Songbook: The Next Round

Cover images: Photo of Barrie Kosky by Jan Windszus Photography; Foundation logo designed by Studio Simpatico; photo of Andrew Polec by Matt Madison-Clark

Kurt Weill Newsletter

VOLUME 39

NUMBER 2

FALL 2021

© 2021 Kurt Weill Foundation for Music
7 East 20th Street
New York, NY 10003-1106
newsletter@kwf.org

ISSN 0899-6407
tel (212) 505-5240
fax (212) 353-9663
kwfinfo@kwf.org

Published twice a year, the *Kurt Weill Newsletter* features articles and reviews (books, performances, recordings) that center on Kurt Weill but take a broader look at issues of twentieth-century music and theater. With a print run of 4,000 copies, the *Newsletter* is distributed worldwide. Subscriptions are free. The editor welcomes the submission of articles, reviews, and news items for consideration.

A variety of opinions are expressed in the *Newsletter*; they do not necessarily represent the publisher's official viewpoint. Letters to the editor are welcome.

Newsletter Staff

Dave Stein, Editor
Veronica Chaffin, Production and Circulation
Natasha Nelson, Editorial Assistant

Kurt Weill Foundation Officers

Kim H. Kowalke, *President and CEO*
Theodore S. Chapin, *Chair of the Board of Trustees*
Philip Getter, *Executive Vice Chair*
Guy Stern, *Vice Chair*

Trustees: Naomi André, André Bishop, Victoria Clark, Joanne Hubbard Cossa, Susan Feder, Corey Field, James Holmes, Welz Kauffman, Jeanine Tesori, Tazewell Thompson

Trustees Emeriti: Milton Coleman, Paul Epstein, Walter Hinderer

Honorary Trustees: James Conlon, Stephen E. Davis, HK Gruber, Teresa Stratas

Websites

<https://www.kwf.org>
<https://www.marc-blitzstein.org>

Social Media

facebook.com/KurtWeillFoundation
instagram.com/kurtweillfndn/
twitter.com/KurtWeillFndn
youtube.com/KurtWeillFoundation
instagram.com/LotteLenyaCompetition
facebook.com/LenyaCompetition

2021 Mid-Year Grant Recipients

Professional Performance

Volksoper Wien, Vienna, Austria. *Lady in the Dark*.
Cape Town Opera, Cape Town, South Africa. *Die sieben Todsünden, Mahagonny Songspiel*.

College/University Performance

James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA. *Street Scene*.
Oklahoma City University, Oklahoma City, OK. *The Threepenny Opera*.
California State University Northridge, Northridge, CA. *Street Scene*.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Pandemic or no pandemic, Berlin restored itself to pride of place in 2021 as the home of Weill, Brecht, and Hauptmann's greatest triumphs with productions of *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* opening within two months of each other, staged by the same man. We saw our opportunity and asked star director Barrie Kosky for an interview, a request he graciously granted; we are pleased and honored to publish the results. To evaluate his productions, we have called on leading theater scholar David Savran, who heads a brief but memorable review section.

Our news section is richer than usual, largely because of the Lotte Lenya Competition, which saw its own burst of activity this

summer and fall. First, the final round, delayed until August but held live in New York City for the first time. Also for the first time, the Foundation arranged for an edited film (in addition to a live stream) to be shown on operavision.eu. Veteran Competition observer Michael Lasser covers both film and finals in this issue, followed by updates on past prizewinners, the Foundation's sponsored artists of 2021, and Volume Two of the Competition Songbook, introduced in the Fall 2020 *Newsletter*.

Dave Stein

Kurt Weill Prize 2021

Granted biennially to encourage scholarship in the disciplines of music, theater, dance, literary criticism and history addressing music theater since 1900 (including opera), the Kurt Weill Prize returns in 2021 with a new wrinkle. Past Prizes have generally recognized one book and one article per cycle. This year, after careful consideration, the Prize panel decided to award three article prizes and declined to award a book prize. The articles:

Ebright, Ryan. "Doctor Atomic or: How John Adams Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Sound Design," published in *Cambridge Opera Journal* 31.1 (March 2019);

Magee, Jeffrey. "Whose Turn Is It? Where *Gypsy's* Finale Came from, and Where it Went," published in *Studies in Musical Theatre* 13.2 (June 2019);

Pistorius, Juliana. "Inhabiting Whiteness: The Eoan Group *La traviata*, 1956" published in *Cambridge Opera Journal* 31.1 (March 2019).

The panelists had much to say about each winning article:

Ebright: "This article opens up new pathways of understanding and reinvigorating the way we think about a much-discussed genre. It is already making a splash for helping define a new arena of study: sound design in opera."

Magee: "The structure of the article is ingenious—all of the 'Turns' for the author, lyricist, composer(s), actors, and even the arguable progeny of 'Rose's Turn' with references to the big numbers of *Follies*, *Company*, *Assassins*, and *Sweeney Todd* in 'Sweeney's Turn.' With a seemingly modest focus on one number, this article opens up the worlds of musical theater through its sources, analysis, and compelling interpretation."

Pistorius: "In its reframing of the way opera was consumed in a particular place and time, this tightly-argued study reveals unexpected insights into operatic production beyond the European centers of power. Her archival research is very impressive, and given the debates about race in the casting of opera, this essay makes an invaluable contribution to the field."

Nominations for the next Kurt Weill Prize will be accepted until 30 April 2023. See kwf.org for details.

Davide Levi



Conducting Fellows

Established in 2015, the Julius Rudel/Kurt Weill Conducting Fellowship has been bestowed upon Adam Turner (2016), Jonathon Heyward (2017), and Jesse Leong (2019). This fall a new name joins the ranks, Davide Levi, who assists musical director (and Kurt Weill Lifetime Achievement Award winner) James Holmes in preparations for a new production of *Lady in*

the Dark at the Volksoper Wien (see p. 16). A graduate of the Conservatorio G. Verdi in Milan, Levi has already picked up considerable experience at several European houses, including Oper Leipzig, Garsington Opera, Teatro Lirico di Cagliari, and Opera North. He also worked on English Touring Opera's lauded production of *Der Silbersee* in 2019, for which Holmes also served as musical director.

Holmes acknowledged the new Fellow: "I look forward to working with Davide in Vienna—not just to try and pass on what I've learned, but maybe learn new things myself from a fresh and talented pair of ears." Not to be outdone, Levi responded, "I am thrilled to have this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to work with James Holmes on Weill's iconic musical play at one of the most important opera houses in the world. I can't imagine a better way to deepen my knowledge of Weill's style and work, and I am certain that this experience will have a huge and lasting impact on my career."

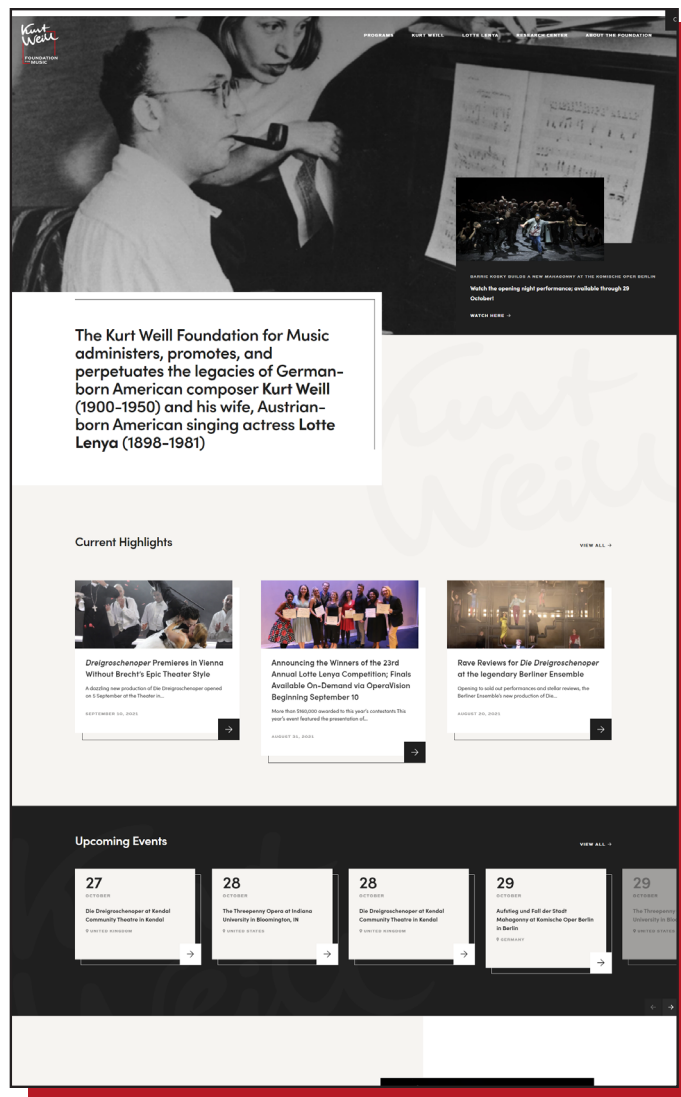
Refresh Your Browser: The New kwf.org



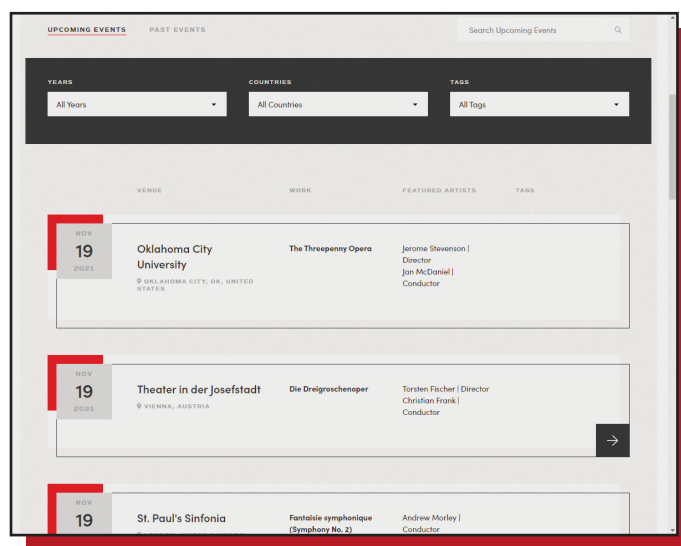
On 12 July 2021, the Kurt Weill Foundation went live with a completely redesigned web site that offers a number of new features intended to assist a wide variety of users. The new design incorporates the Foundation's rich audio and video resources into a broad range of pages. The revised look boasts a new logo, revamped page and menu designs, easy-to-read fonts, more images, and tighter integration with our social media platforms. Clearer navigation and improved search capabilities promote ready access to content across the board. The top menu is slimmed to five headings: Programs; Kurt Weill; Lotte Lenya; Research Center; About the Foundation. While most content from earlier versions of kwf.org remains, the site makes available for the first time extensive new material focused on Weill, Lenya, and the Foundation. (The official Marc Blitzstein site remains at marc-blitzstein.org.)

We're adding fresh content and news regularly. Please stop by the new site, look around, and get in touch. Some new features:

- An events calendar that shows performances and happenings of interest all over the world
- Detailed biographical timelines for Weill and Lenya augmented with a wealth of still images, audio, and video
- A unique page for each of Weill's works, from full-length operas to single songs, with plenty of media
- Essential reading and listening lists, and enhanced presentation of audio and video, for both Weill and Lenya
- Detailed descriptions of volumes of the Kurt Weill Edition
- Summaries of the holdings of the Weill-Lenya Research Center, organized by medium, with examples
- An interactive Licensing Guide that helps visitors determine how to license Weill works (including individual songs) for a number of different uses
- A page summarizing the copyright status of Weill's works in different territories
- A "How can we help?" page that directs users to useful features, as well as a "contact us" form for quick access to Foundation staff
- Every issue of the Newsletter since 1983.



Homepage



Events calendar

Kurt Weill Timeline

Through a rich combination of image, sound and text, the Timeline presents in five segments an illustrated sequence of significant moments in Kurt Weill's life and career.



1900 - 1918

Musical Formation

Born into a religious and musical family, the young Kurt Weill's talent impresses his peers and teachers early on. He takes full advantage of the resources in his home town, Dessau (known as the 'Boyhood of the North'), to gain a thorough grounding in musical theater.

1918 - 1926

Portrait of the Composer as a Young Man

TIMELINE WITH MEDIA **TEXT ONLY CHRONOLOGY**

Biographical timelines

First Compositions

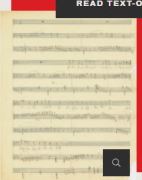
First preserved compositions: two songs, "Mi addir" (a Jewish wedding song) and "Es blühen zwei flammende Rosen" (Two flaming roses bloom)

1913

1914 JULY

Visits Uncle Emil Ackermann and Aunt Bertha in Freiburg with his siblings. Weill's first surviving letter dates from this trip.

READ TEXT-ONLY CHRONOLOGY



On the verso of "Mi addir" Weill composed the song fragment "Es blühen zwei flammende Rosen" (text author unknown)

Biographical timeline detail


Love Life

Vaudeville in two parts. Music and lyrics by Kurt Weill and Alan Jay Lerner. Book by Alan Jay Lerner.

DURATION
Full Evening, 110 minutes music


FIRST BROADWAY PRODUCTION
7 October 1946, New York, 46th Street Theater, Ella Kazan, dir., Joseph Littau, cond. (252 performances)

For information about licensing this work for use, see our online guide



Susan Cooper (Rebecca Jo Loeb) sings "Mr. Right" in the Theater Freiburg production, 2017 | Photo: Hupfeld

Featured Audio & Video



"This is the Life"

Michael Scarborough; BBC broadcast, 31 December 1992

Works pages

Licensing Guide

Online Licensor Tool

With a few easy questions, find information relating to licensing any Kurt Weill material.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO DO?

Please Select

Please Select

- Produce a Stage Work
- Perform a Concert Work
- Use a Song
- License a Photo of Weill, Lenya, or a Weill Work
- Use or Reprint Writings by Weill or Lenya
- All Other Inquiries

Interactive licensing guide

The Lotte Lenya Competition

OVERVIEW GUIDELINES & APPLICATION CONTESTANT RESOURCES PREVIOUS COMPETITIONS CONTACT

Now accepting applications for the 2022 Competition!

Click here for the results of the 2021 Finals and to watch Finalists' performances

"No vocal contest better targets today's total-package talents." — Opera News

In 1996, to honor the centenary of the birth of Lotte Lenya (1898-1981), an extraordinary singer/actress

New Lenya Competition homepage

Double Your Premieres, Double Your Fun: An Interview with Barrie Kosky



PHOTO: JAN WINDSZUS PHOTOGRAPHY

Barrie Kosky

The new season in Berlin has already offered new productions of *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* led by one of the opera world's leading lights, Barrie Kosky, in his final season as *Intendant* at Berlin's Komische Oper. We celebrate this remarkable confluence by interviewing the man who made it happen. Kosky has been a popular interview subject recently—justly so—and we have appended a rich selection of quotations taken from some of those interviews to round out his talk with the *Newsletter*. Please see our review of both productions (p. 11) as well.

KWN: Let's start with the extraordinary, if not unprecedented, production of two Weill works at the same time, in the same city, by the same director. Was this an ambition of yours, or something that just fell into place?

BK: No, it was planned. Originally, the premiere of *Mahagonny* was scheduled for September 2020; *The Threepenny Opera* was meant to come after that, in January 2021. The Berliner Ensemble, the Komische Oper, and the Berlin Philharmonic—we all got together and decided to do a Kurt Weill Festival in Berlin. It was going to run through two months: *Threepenny Opera*, *Mahagonny*, symphony concerts, and other events. This was the plan, but the pandemic put an end to it. The premiere of *Threepenny Opera* got postponed five times in the course of 2021, until August, and the premiere of *Mahagonny* was postponed for a full year. We got the shows on—not in the order that we originally planned, but in the order that is actually better artistically.

KWN: So postponing the premieres worked out?

BK: Yes. In the case of *The Threepenny Opera*, the postponements of the premiere gave us a very long rehearsal period, because we got together every three months and reworked it. I was still doing new things up until two days before the premiere in August. So it turned into an enormous benefit.

KWN: You've already alluded to the wreckage of the Berlin festival; most of those events will never take place. But you managed to bring both of your major productions to the stage. You must've needed a lot of stamina and determination to make that happen.

BK: Well, yes, but I wasn't pushing Mother Courage's wagon alone, because I was working with wonderful teams at the Komische Oper and the Berliner Ensemble. In the case of *Mahagonny*, we knew it was going to happen at some point, because the set and costumes had been built and that's a lot of money invested,

half a million euros. When we looked to set the date, we had to be sure we could get our cast together, in particular Allan Clayton (Jimmy Mahoney), who is very much in demand.

The Threepenny Opera was easier, because the cast was formed entirely from within the Berliner Ensemble, which meant that we didn't have to worry about, "He's going to do a film," "She's off doing another show"—because they were all retained and paid full salary during the pandemic.

What was *hard* was to not get trapped in the never-ending labyrinth that is *The Threepenny Opera*. Because once you open one door and solve one problem, another problem rears its ugly head. Then there's a problem in a scene later on, and once you think you've solved that character and that song, the whole production comes into focus, and we ask, "Is this really what we want to say?" I really struggled, as every director does with *Threepenny*. Any director or actor—particularly an actor playing Mackie Messer—who tells you this piece is not really tricky is lying. The first version, after eight weeks of rehearsal, I didn't like at all. The unofficial run-through took place in January, in front of a small, invited audience. I saw it and said, "It's clear to me that I've failed." But the result was that we went back to the rehearsal room, unsewed everything and looked at it again, and made a few very big changes. I eliminated costumes; I redid scenes. The people that saw the end result in August who had seen the run-through in January were quite shocked: "Oh, wow, you've been at work, Barrie." I did four versions of the production, essentially. At best, the first version would've been a lukewarm success.

KWN: Did the cast respond well to the disruption and the changes?

BK: Oh, yeah. I didn't view it as disruption, just part of the process. I'm an old soldier, so I very much believe theater is a wonderful combination of poetry and practicality, intellect and ideas, art and banality, and hard work. The nature of theater is that it's quite messy to put together; I'm suspicious of anyone who thinks that theater is easy. The challenges of *Threepenny Opera* are how to link the dialogue with the genius of the songs and to find a way through the dramaturgical jumble of the last third of the play, which we have adapted radically. Then there's the challenge of making it speak to the twenty-first century.

KWN: And particularly in the theater where the world premiere took place, and with Brecht's own company—did that add any pressure?

BK: No, it was the opposite of pressure. I felt the warm embrace of Weill and Brecht, knowing that they had sat in the same theater. I told the cast that they are a little like Waldorf and Statler from the Muppets, in a box beside the stage grumbling and mumbling, and we just have to assume they're there. But I found it quite comforting. I mean, I survived doing the *Meistersinger of Nuremberg* in Bayreuth. Sitting in Wagner's theater was much scarier than sitting in Brecht's theater. They still have Brecht's original production desk. You can either say, "Oh my God, how can I be sitting here?" or "This is not a temple." If I sit behind Brecht's table, I'm not sitting at an altar. I actually carved my initials into it, very small, like a naughty schoolboy.

KWN: Can you talk about your approach to casting the major roles in both works? What were you looking for, and were you happy with what you found?

BK: I already knew most of the actors we wanted, but they all had to pass a singing test. For example, I was interested in having a younger Mackie than normal—and there was an actor, Nico Holonics, whom I liked very much, and I knew he could sing really well. I've sat through too many *Threepenny* productions in the last twenty years where the actor fakes his way through the music. So we had auditions, then we auditioned a number of the actors again just to see if they could sing. We already knew that Constanze Becker and Tilo Nest [Mrs. and Mr. Peachum] could sing, and Bettina Hoppe [Jenny]. Adam Benzwi, the music director, and I cast around them.

To do *Threepenny* with actors who are already part of an ensemble is a big advantage. In the English-speaking world, most productions are done like any other musical; you bring people together only for the period of rehearsals and performances and then they go their separate ways. The trouble with that is there's no way to create a coherent performance style. One of the major questions you have to answer with *Threepenny* is "What is our performance style? What is our attitude as actors to the audience and to each other?" These can't be answered by reading the "Dummy's Guide to Alienation Technique." If you have a group of people that have been working together for years, there's trust, there's acceptance of risk, and the ability to be very flexible very quickly, which are necessary for any good work, especially with a piece like *Threepenny*. These actors were hungry to try something new and to work with me and Adam. It was a wonderful experience.

KWN: Brecht once said that of all his plays, *The Threepenny Opera* was one of the few that really works for repertory companies.

BK: I would agree enormously.

KWN: You had to work hard to find the right approach to *The Threepenny Opera*, and that's a process that began before the pandemic shutdown, right?

BK: Yes and no, because we didn't answer any questions until we went into rehearsal. It's impossible to answer any questions about *Threepenny* without actors in the room, because it's all performance: how do you sing this song, or act this scene, and what is this piece about in 2021? We had designed this metal labyrinth for the set, and we had no idea how we were going to use it.

Barrie Kosky on Weill and Brecht

Weill

Weill is as important to the development of musical theater as Wagner. For me, Weill belongs right up there with Schoenberg and Stravinsky among the greatest composers of the twentieth century.

Kurt Weill plays with the entire history of German opera. Not just German opera, German music. You hear Bach—chorales, the St. Matthew Passion, etc. You still hear Mozart in a lot of *Mahagonny*, as in *Dreigroschenoper*. You hear a lot of Mahler in *Mahagonny*, but not in *Dreigroschenoper*. *Dreigroschenoper* is like an hors d'oeuvre, and the main course is *Mahagonny*, where you hear a composer really discovering and celebrating his own voice.

The most disturbing thing about Weill: You have the sound of Berlin in the 1920s and '30s, and in addition, the sound of the desert. That is a very, very old Jewish sound that he learned from his father in synagogue. That melancholy, yearning quality comes from deep in Weill's soul; it's in his artistic DNA.

Weill and Brecht

There are only a few writer-composer combinations that are truly remarkable in the consistently high level of their work: Strauss and Hoffmannsthal, Mozart and Da Ponte, and Weill and Brecht.

There's this style of singing Weill and Brecht that has developed, a tradition that I think is all wrong. I call it "Park, bark, and snark." "Park" means I stay in the same position onstage and don't move. "Bark": I scream the lyrics straight at the audience. "Snark" is a mixture of arrogance and self-satisfaction. Your attitude is that "I as a performer know better than you, sitting in the darkness there. We are here to teach you, and not just to teach you, but to make you feel terrible. And the way in which we'll do that is to park, bark, and snark this music and text." This tradition developed after the war in Germany, particularly East Germany. Adam Benzwi and I are pushing back.

We always know there is a very weird tango happening here between Kurt and Bert, where they both try and take control of the dance. The excitement arises when they contradict each other, and when Brecht writes a very dry, ironic text, and Weill puts music full of yearning and desire underneath it, and then you get both. The contradiction's already there in the composition.

Weill is the honey; Brecht is the nuts. Mix them together and you get the best kind of theater.

Barrie Kosky on Mahagonny

Rules for the City without Rules

The only way to perform this opera, with its overpowering expressiveness, is to adopt a simple form, in which the text and music come out of the bodies of the characters.

You shouldn't see the city [onstage]. Mahagonny is the Volk. It's the people.

When they're singing about sex and money and all you see onstage is sex and money, it's deadly. The whole thing collapses!

My team and I discovered problems that we'd never thought of, and solutions that we never dreamed possible. We had very talented, intelligent, and creative actors. I don't think you can do *Threepenny Opera* if you don't have smart actors. You need to play subjective and objective almost simultaneously; it requires technique that borders on the virtuosic. So I had a lot of smart people in the room, which sometimes can be a hindrance, if everyone's got too many opinions. But in the case of *Threepenny*, it was enormously helpful.

KWN: What can you say about the amount of preparation time for *Threepenny Opera* and *Mahagonny*? You had more time than you expected for *Threepenny Opera*, but did you have enough time for *Mahagonny*?

BK: Yes. I've done *Mahagonny* before, in 2008. I only do a piece a second time if I feel I didn't get it right the first time. (I'm not sure you can ever get *Mahagonny* or *Threepenny* right, but you can try climbing the mountain.) In the case of *Mahagonny*, I knew the piece inside out, and I knew the pitfalls. I'm a different person now, so I wanted to push even further some of the ideas I had explored, but in a different way. And with *Mahagonny*, the tricky thing is how can you get away from making the whole thing

preachy? Most productions want to critique the audience that's sitting there, and there's nothing worse than being preached at for three hours. How do you find the radicality of the piece again without adopting the postures and the tactics of, say, the world premiere in 1930, or a subsequent production? Particularly in Germany, where there's still a great discussion about what *Mahagonny* is and what it represents. The biggest decision I made, from the beginning, was to say, "It is very important not to illustrate or to stage what they're singing and talking about." There has to be almost an Old Testament ban on the image—any attempt to represent the whores, alcohol, or whatever through sets, props, video. It's a dead end, as I have experienced in many productions, even my own.

My starting point for *Mahagonny* was the wonderful analysis of the piece by Weill himself. He said that *Mahagonny* is a parable, which means we are dealing with symbols and metaphors. We are not dealing in archetypes, or realism, or representation, or even an idea. He said Mahagonny does not exist; people make it out of their needs and desires. In other words, Mahagonny is just the 100 people on stage. Then we developed the idea of a set with mirrored walls, so people just reflect back at themselves through the course of the evening. That emphasizes a sort of narcissism which I think is inherent in the piece.



The Bible? Or Wagner?

Mahagonny has a bit of the flavor of a morality play from the Middle Ages—well-made popular theater of the fourteenth century.

Weill and Brecht created an anti-Tristan and Isolde with Jim and Jenny. When you talk about their love scenes, you have to put "love" in quotation marks. She asks him what he wants for his money in terms of hair, makeup, underwear or no underwear? He has to decide. But Weill makes it complicated for the audience by setting the scene to amazingly beautiful music, and that opens up a whole emotional spectrum. Weill makes the whole thing ambivalent!

This work is the next chapter of *Moses und Aron*. Schoenberg's opera is season 1; season 2 is *Mahagonny*. Season 1 finishes with a cliffhanger. Moses is dead, the Israelites wander, they see a cloud. They run after this cloud, this vision, through the desert. Then they hear that someone is starting a city called "Mahagonny." So to me it's season 2 of the twentieth-century German-Jewish story. And season 3, in my opinion, is *Fiddler on the Roof*. To put all three works onstage as a trilogy in a single weekend—that would be amazing.

Mahagonny starts out as a cross between true-crime story and silent film, and ends up as a variant of Christ's Passion. Take the sensational, deeply disturbing music Weill composed for Jimmy's "Nur die Nacht." It is Christ's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane—as an aria. Then, barely a minute later, we have a burlesque of a trial, reminiscent of Christ's appearance before the high priests, and Weill composed magnificent circus music for it. Our production celebrates this ambivalence with no qualms.

KWN: Did you find that *Threepenny Opera* and *Mahagonny* invite you to approach them differently with respect to the audience? Is one more confrontational than the other?

BK: *Mahagonny* is ten times more confrontational than *Threepenny*, which is a naughty, satirical wink. Even Brecht winks; this was all written before he was a Communist. Retrospectively, of course, he looked at the piece differently. I had to remind the Germans that the only reason this piece came into existence was that Elisabeth Hauptmann knew about *The Beggar's Opera* in London, where it had been making thousands of pounds. She thought they should bring that to Germany and make some money. So let's get away from the idea that this piece is a devastating anti-capitalist critique—it's not. *Threepenny* is like a great operetta. Think of *Fledermaus*, where you're laughing at the hypocrisy of these unpleasant, unattractive bourgeois people. Mr. and Mrs. Peachum are just the twentieth-century Berlin version of Eisenstein and Rosalinde in *Fledermaus*.

And the creators were also—we must never forget—playing with the idea of opera and what the audience expects from the story. There's a *deus ex machina* at the end of *Threepenny Opera*. They stop the action because this convention means that we cannot hang this man; therefore, we're giving you a happy ending—is that what you want? It's a very clever, subversive play on what the audience wants, but it's light. It's Ernst Lubitsch. The satire and cruelty are underneath the comedy.

With *Mahagonny*, you're in a completely different world theatrically and musically, and you have a completely different end. There is no *deus ex machina* for Jim Mahoney. It's even worse, because Jim dies—in my production—at the hands of the entire group. They sacrifice him, like a ram, like Abraham and Isaac. And he dies, and then God comes to Mahagonny. So it's a fake *deus ex machina*. It's brilliant to do these pieces together, because they both use the *deus ex machina*. One is sort of real (even though it's really fake, because Mr. Peachum announces it), and

What Is Mahagonny for?

You can sum up in two sentences what happens in *La traviata* or *La bohème*. What's really special about *Mahagonny* is the sheer number of levels and forms you find, and that the plot goes in so many directions. There's no way you can do it justice in two sentences. It is a kaleidoscope of the depths of human depravity.

The piece is a devastating, satirical critique of the abuse of power, of what happens in societies, the contradiction between facts and fiction, between morals and no morals, between "What is allowed?" and "What is not allowed?"

Nothing ages faster than satire, unless it's overtly political theater. Shakespeare showed us that to write good political theater, you write about human history. That's why *Henry IV* and *Mahagonny* are still relevant today. Not because they are historical or political documentaries, but because they are about the human race.

In the final analysis, the work is deeply pessimistic, because Weill and Brecht lay bare human greed, human stupidity, human arrogance in all their contradictions.

the other is a deeply satirical take on the idea of God coming to save people when it's already all over. The message at the end of *Mahagonny* is incredibly bleak, and it's very unpleasant and exhausting. It offers absolutely no glimmer of hope. It's interesting that on opening night, the audience didn't quite know what to do when the performance ended. At first they held back, which is great, and then the applause built through the next few minutes. But at the end of *Threepenny*, the audience screams with delight. It's the sun and the moon, two different planets. *Threepenny* is different because Brecht and Weill wanted to entertain you. But they also wanted you to ask, "What am I actually laughing about here, or enjoying here?"

KWN: You mentioned Elisabeth Hauptmann, and it seems rather daring to emphasize Hauptmann's role in writing *The Threepenny Opera* in the heart of Brecht's domain. Did you feel any resistance—

BK: No. I think the holy status of Brecht has long crumbled. People accept him now as an incredibly complex artist with many contradictions, like his plays. But when it comes to his career—and particularly *The Threepenny Opera*—there has just not been enough credit given to Elisabeth Hauptmann. She came up with the idea in the first place, and she translated *The Beggar's Opera* from English and understood all the English references. I'm sure she helped Brecht throughout the work process, and helped him figure out what to do. She was a co-writer.

KWN: We'd like to step back and ask a couple of questions about Kurt Weill in a broader context. What is your assessment of Weill as a theater composer and his place in the history of musical theater?

BK: He is one of the pivotal figures of twentieth-century music theater, the man that bridges Europe and Broadway. The pivotal moment was when he arrived in New York, in the same way that Schoenberg arrived in Los Angeles and changed American music, with Stravinsky, around the same time. To think you had Stravinsky and Schoenberg and Kurt Weill and Thomas Mann and the rest of them, all in America. The culture wouldn't have been the same without these émigrés, in Hollywood or on Broadway.

The Broadway composers—Berlin, Gershwin, Arlen, Kern, Rodgers—mostly children of Jewish immigrants, were mainly influenced by operetta or Yiddish theater of the turn of the twentieth century. So you hear Strauss, Lehár, Kálmán, and then of course they're all hearing jazz, too, in that extraordinary, alchemical world of New York. But along comes Kurt Weill, and he's a different kettle of fish, although he has a few things in common with those Broadway composers. Why are all these composers Jewish, with the exception of Porter and a few others? It has to do with melody. The rhythm comes from the streets of New York, but the melody comes from Jewish history and culture, consciously or unconsciously. And Kurt Weill being the son of a cantor was brought up with Jewish religious music. Exactly like Jacques Offenbach, whose father was also a cantor. How interesting is it that the pivotal operetta composer of the nineteenth century was the son of a cantor, and one of the pivotal figures of twentieth-century operetta and musicals was also the son of a cantor? That's a very important connection.

Kurt Weill arrived in New York with an incredibly sophisticated idea of theater, and then proceeded to radically revolutionize the Broadway musical. Look at those shows! It's like a bomb going off on Broadway. I argue that Stephen Sondheim does not exist without Kurt Weill in New York. Period. End of discussion.

Barrie Kosky on Die Dreigroschenoper

The Work

For Weill and Brecht, it was an experiment. They didn't really know what they were doing. It's a bouillabaisse of varied forms, ideas, and languages, and we should celebrate that. It's a satirical play about capitalism to some extent, and it's also about love. Brecht had a lot to say about love.

It's ironic that both of them made a lot of money off of a play about how money corrupts relationships and public-spirited action.

The real reason for the success of *Threepenny* was Weill's music. That's what made all of Berlin say, "What's going on here?" The songs became immediate hits, like pop songs.

KWN: I was going to ask you about influence, and you just answered the question, but maybe you have more to say, not just about Weill's effect on American musical theater, but worldwide.

BK: Just enormous, and not just Broadway. *Love Life*, *Lady*, and *Venus*, they're unbelievable, radical pieces, in subject matter, structure, and form. This is not Rodgers and Hammerstein, or Johann Strauss or Lehár. Weill realized that he could bring ideas and intellect to popular entertainment. The tragedy for German music and for Broadway is that Weill died when he was fifty. What shows were in him that we were robbed of?

What is it about Weill's music that touches and moves people all over the world, that transcends language and haunts people in Asia, Europe, the Americas? It's because it's very authentic. Like all great composers—Mozart, Bach, Johann Strauss—Weill taps into this river of sound that is part of human consciousness. It's that deep. It's that important.

As you see, Weill is one of my top composers and always has been. I'm on a mission in Germany to make people understand that Weill is as important to German culture as Schumann and Schubert and Brahms in terms of the influence he had on song-writing. But it's quite a struggle sometimes.

KWN: Any other Weill works you'd like to direct?

BK: I've got my long-term eye on *Love Life*, an extraordinary piece. That's a project that's bubbling away, because it needs some work. I love the idea of *Lady in the Dark*, and I adore every note of the music, but I'm not sure if I personally can find a way to make it successful. And I'd like to take a close look at *Der Silbersee*. Oh, sorry! I forgot *Street Scene*. I'm sure I'll do that in the next ten years. But *Love Life*—it's unbelievable what's going on in there. That's the undiscovered masterpiece.

The labyrinthine set designed by Rebecca Ringst



PHOTO: JIR / BERLINER ENSEMBLE

The Production

The sets must always contribute to what the characters are doing. Our set creates a labyrinth beneath the city, a parallel underworld. Claustrophobic. The characters are always in awkward, uncomfortable positions.

Mack loves Polly—he loves all his women. So often Mack is conceived as completely jaded. But he is Dionysus. He wants to kiss and screw and eat whatever he wants and have it all.

Polly is often presented as a young, innocent, bourgeois child led astray by Mack the Knife, the worst possible boyfriend. That's the wrong idea. Tiger Brown is another lover, the person who stays with Mackie. Sometimes this play is breathtakingly sad.



Macheath (Nico Holonics)

PHOTO: JÖRG BRÜGGEMANN