Die Dreigroschenoper & Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny

Berliner Ensemble

Premiere: 13 August 2021

Komische Oper Berlin

Premiere: 2 October 2021

Macheath (Nico Holonics) leads the "Zweites Dreigroschenfinale"

PHOTO: JR / BERLINER ENSEMBLE

When Barrie Kosky was appointed *Intendant* of the Komische Oper in 2012, he was a firebrand notorious for in-your-face, often queer deconstructions of operatic and dramatic classics. He did not turn to directing popular music theater until he initiated a high-profile series of operettas and musicals at the Komische Oper. His revivals of forgotten operettas from the 1920s and '30s, in particular, have been widely hailed for their historical importance and theatrical brilliance. But no special pleading is required for new productions of two of the best-known and most widely performed Weill-Brecht collaborations. Kosky followed an impressive debut with the legendary Berliner Ensemble—in whose house, Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, *Die Dreigroschenoper* premiered in 1928—with *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* at the Komische Oper several weeks later. In directing two unquestionable masterpieces of musical theater shortly after the reopening of German theaters, Kosky opts for strikingly stripped-down productions that for all their scenic refinement and ingenuity revolve around the skilled and communicative performers at his disposal in both houses. He has re-engineered both pieces to speak directly to contemporary audiences; they look, sound, and feel as if they've had the dust blown off of them. Kosky understands and respects Weill's musical dramaturgy and emphasizes the importance of text while rejecting the all-too-common approach to Brecht's songs in Germany: in his words, park, bark, snark. Whether working with opera singers or actors, Kosky has little patience with abrasive performances and the accusatory posturing that afflicts too many Brecht productions. His collaboration at the Berliner Ensemble with music director Adam Benzwi, the best conductor of operettas and musicals in Berlin, is especially felicitous. At the Komische Oper, Ainārs Rubiķis does not deliver comparable musical brilliance, but the final scenes still resonate powerfully. In both, the musical subtleties and pungent Weillian counterpoint come through loud and clear, even when, in *Mahagonny*, the quality of the singing is uneven.

Like almost all German theater productions today, Kosky's *Dreigroschenoper* and *Mahagonny* adopt modern dress and manners. Re-envisioning their male protagonists as thugs who wield their switchblades casually and lethally, Kosky ushers both works into the age of gangster capitalism, a world of extortion, murder, and sadistic payback, all driven by the seductive, disruptive, and potentially lethal power of money and even more, the helplessness caused by its absence. *Dreigroschenoper* is set among the rich and glamorous while *Mahagonny* envisions the opera's imaginary metropolis as a boozed-up, sex-charged, working-class paradise that is gradually transformed into hell. Although the former piece shrinks the size of both the gang and the police, the latter floods the stage with crowds, reminding us (even in the time of COVID) that cities are made up more of human bodies than of bricks and mortar. Notably, however, Kosky nearly empties the stage for the final scenes of both works, leaving only stark, desolate tableaus—missives from a devastated world. Even *Dreigroschenoper*'s Mounted Messenger is purely formulaic, and no hint of jubilation greets Macheath's eleventh-hour reprieve. On the contrary, his rescue from the gallows merely releases him into the cutthroat capitalist jungle which he seems hell-bent on dominating. The finale of *Mahagonny* is even bleaker; the opera ends not with marching groups of demonstrators but an offstage chorus whose protests from the wings mock the appallingly mute tableau of Jim Mahoney's bloodied corpse, a tableau that evokes the arbitrary yet systematic fatality of Kafka's *The Trial*. In both productions, Kosky's refusal to provide catharsis creates an apocalyptic echo to Weill's chilling cadences, all too *à propos* for a world ravaged by pandemics, climate change, and neo-fascist bullies.

Kosky's *Dreigroschenoper* sports an all-star cast at the top of its game. The Peachums are elegantly coutured racketeers: Constanze Becker's Mrs. Peachum a predator in a black sable coat (evoking Maria Callas's 1970 Blackglama ad) and Tilo Nest a ruffian in a smoking jacket. Cynthia Micas is a tough-as-nails Polly, while Bettina Hoppe is a hard-edged yet deeply sympathetic Jenny. The center of the piece, however, is Macheath, played by Nico Holonics, who brilliantly weaponizes his leading-man good looks and charm. His curly pompadour and almost exaggeratedly beautiful croon clash startlingly with this Macheath's homicidal ruthlessness—an echo of the actor who first played the role, operetta star Harald Paulsen. Kosky has intriguingly cast the LGBTQ-identified Kathrin Wehlisch as Tiger Brown, which she plays as part pants role, part drag king, part trans man. This indeterminacy licenses a sexual intimacy between Brown and Macheath that begins with a disconcertingly seductive "Kanonen-Song" and ends with Brown attempting to feed the blindfolded Macheath his last meal of limp, hollandaise-dripping, phallic asparagus.

Rebecca Ringst's simple set—glitter curtains and a huge, mobile, jungle gym-like structure—is meant in its varying configurations to suggest prison and playground, a vast underground city

Bill (Tom Erik Lie) and Jim (Allan Clayton) in Act III

PHOTO: IKO FREESE / DRAMA-BERLIN.DE

of cops and robbers, and a labyrinth of pipes and sewers. The monochrome black-and-white of the set and costumes is periodically punctured by the lustrously colored dresses of the three women Mackie seduces, Polly, Jenny, and Lucy, and most of all by the shock of red stage blood on the unidentified man Mackie viciously knifes just before the "Zweites Dreigroschenfinale." In the last act, the blindfolded, unredeemable Macheath is denied even the astute social commentary provided by his farewell speech, which Brecht added in 1931 to sharpen the piece's political message. Instead, he is attached to wires and a noose and hanged high above the stage until his rescue. The production ends, like *Mahagonny*, with the actors singing the final chorus offstage, as Macheath is quickly reclothed in a modern business suit, a cutthroat ready to disappear into the crowd, while an LED sign spells out in giant letters the hero's narcissistic credo, "Love Me."

If Kosky's *Dreigroschenoper* is the well-deserved hit of the season, his *Mahagonny* is decidedly less user-friendly. The production is more idea-driven, at times almost resembling a piece of conceptual art. The nearly empty stage is dominated in the first act by a huge black drop with a metallic grid that evokes both Brecht's "city of nets" and a prison camp. That is supplemented and then superseded by two giant, mirrored, V-shaped walls as well as rolling wardrobe mirrors into which the good citizens of Mahagonny sometimes stare distractedly; their images become life-size, animated selfies. Although these mirror-bound selfies bring the piece decidedly into the age of TikTok, they also serve in the alarming final tableau to multiply Jim Mahoney's mangled body to infinity. The theater's turntable is dotted with large traps that serve as entrances and exits but in reality resemble nothing so much as graves.

Because Kosky sees *Mahagonny* as a companion to Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, his production emphasizes the biblical and mythic character of the narrative. The piece begins, he explains, in an Old Testament wilderness and ends with the passion and death of the not exactly Christlike Jim, whose aria "Nur die Nacht" Kosky regards as an analogue to Jesus's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Fatty and Trinity Moses are garbed as Jewish and Christian clergymen, while in the penultimate scene God comes to Mahagonny in the figure of a "God-Machine," which Kosky describes as a mechanical Golem, a robotic ape-like monster on a mini go-cart on which is inscribed in Hebrew characters "emet" (truth), which quickly drops a letter and turns into "met" (death). The ritualistic quality of the action is underlined by Moses's savage blinding of Jim with his own knife, which, like the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear*, turns him into an emblem of the tragically flawed hero, whose eyes must be gouged out as final proof of emotional and spiritual sightlessness. His execution is then viciously mechanized, transformed into a sadistic, scapegoating ritual in which the citizens of Mahagonny one by one stick Jim's switchblade into his prostrate body.

Mahagonny makes fierce demands on its singers, which some of the cast meet more successfully than others. Most impressive is the fearless Allan Clayton, who does not flinch from making Jim a volatile, scruffy antihero while maintaining a real *Heldentenor* ring throughout. Nadine Weissmann's musical and dramatic acuity turn Begbick into a ruthless floozy, complemented by Jens Larsen's Moses as glowering sociopath. In the trial scene, Tom Erik Lie's Bill becomes an accidental blackguard whose top-hat-and-tails kickline with the blinded Jim is one of the wicked high points of the piece. The weak link, alas, is Nadja Mchantaf as Jenny, whose frail, unsupported soprano never acquires the weight required for the role. Although her unsympathetic mien is all too appropriate for this whore with a heart of fool's gold, her acting does not compensate for her vocal deficiency. The chorus, under the direction of David Cavelius, exceeds its usual high standards and successfully propels several of the opera's most important scenes. Ainārs Rubiķis's musical direction does not serve the opera as well as it should. His tempi are often sluggish; "Alabama-Song," for example, is more dirge than come-on. But his overall shaping of the piece is solid, and in the second performance I saw, he brought out more of the score's rich counterpoint and dramatic thrust.

Barrie Kosky excels at reimagining musical theater classics, often in risky ways, while clearing away the accretions that have disfigured them. Most of his high-concept productions grow out of a visceral understanding of each work's musical and dramaturgical imperatives. That is abundantly clear in *Dreigroschenoper* and *Mahagonny*, which also attest to his ever-growing grasp of subtlety and nuance, and a frank engagement with the hyperemotional kernel of so many musical theater works. Some of Kosky's productions work better than others, owing partly to casting decisions, particularly his tendency to use singers who are already overextended. On the other hand, the opera world is not exactly overflowing with singing actors who have the vocal and dramatic heft to consistently do justice to the core repertoire.

Kosky's skill at contemporizing both of these masterpieces makes me wish he would take on more Weill, a musical dramatist with whom he seems uniquely in tune. How I would love to see him sink his teeth into *Lady in the Dark*, or *Street Scene*, or *Die Bürgschaft*!

David Savran
Berlin

Die Dreigroschenoper

Kammerspiele der Josefstadt Vienna

Premiere: 5 September 2021

Theater performers and directors face a perennial challenge in presenting Weill's songs in their full intensity and musical values. That seems to go double for *Die Dreigroschenoper*, that cocktail of wildly varying song styles and genres. Director Torsten Fischer and the top-notch ensemble at the Kammerspiele have passed precisely this test with flying colors. We tear up at the prospect of Macheath's execution—even though he is a brutal and unrepentant killer who exploits everyone around him—all the more thanks to Jenny, Tiger Brown, et al., who arouse alarming empathy through their singing, even after they have betrayed him.

We are treated to a perfectly planned and timed staging of music and text, simultaneously loving and ruthless, and triumphantly effective as theatrical craft. The focus of the entire production is trained on the music. Fischer uses that focus, combined with poetic expression of Brecht and Hauptmann's text, as a pathway to an entirely earnest staging of the songs, so that they never break away from the underlying drama no matter how freely they are interpreted. Take numbers such as "Moritat," "Ballade vom angenehmen Leben," or "Lied von der Unzulänglichkeit": the drama that unfolds from one stanza to the next within each song guides the staging, so the presentation runs parallel with the development of the music. The nine-person orchestra also proves its worth, with reed players doubling on plucked instruments, rather like the Lewis Ruth Band at the world premiere. Led from the piano by a fully engaged Christian Frank, the orchestra builds a surprisingly keen and fresh sound in the dance-based numbers, and even in denser, more dramatically telling songs such as "Seeräuberjenny" and Macheath's "Grabschrift," where they get to the heart of Weill's orchestration. The musicians are split up and placed here and there on the stage, which makes for variable and sometimes striking sonic and balance effects.

PHOTO: MORITZ SCHELL

Macheath (Claudius von Stolzmann) with Polly (Swintha Gersthofer) in the background

The book has been cut and some of the songs and speeches moved around and reassigned; the changes are dramatically effective, particularly where they excise repetitious dialogue. Discreet amplification allows for a wide range of expression without being too obvious; even when the singing comes close to speech, the pitches remain accurate.

Throughout, the cast proves attuned to the score, deeply expressive, and sometimes stunningly powerful—especially Claudius von Stolzmann as Macheath, who resembles the Joker from *Batman* in his brutality, cynicism, and clown makeup. In the "Zweites Dreigroschenfinale," he roars Brecht's (actually Villon's) sentiments about food and morals directly at the audience from the front of the stage. At the end of the third act, when Macheath is already on the gallows and unable to move freely, he rages without restraint and shouts the "Grabschrift" in pure despair—an indelible, breathtaking assertion of power. "Seeräuberjenny" also left a deep impression from its new position in the third act, delivered an octave below written pitch by Jenny herself, played by Susa Meyer (Polly had sung "Barbara-Song" during the wedding scene in Act I). The precisely calibrated rendering of this warhorse runs the gamut of dynamics, expression, and orchestral color *and* exploits the entire spectrum of vocal production, encompassing silence, breathing, whispering, speaking, singing, vibrato, screaming; each syllable becomes its own work of art. Maria Bill's Mrs. Peachum is modeled on Otto Dix's portraits of Anita Berber and on Rosa Valetti's characterization in the original production. Bill lovingly shapes the "Ballade von der sexuellen Hörigkeit" (also a full octave down) with her raspy and resounding baritone. Herbert Föttinger projects powerful presence as capitalist mafioso and king of the beggars Mr. Peachum; he commands attention every time he steps onstage.

The small stage is divided into several levels (an oddly cubist effect) with slanting planks that the actors use as catwalks. Because each level is open, the cast can perform on any of them, and the intersecting levels in three dimensions contribute their own significance to the staging by forcing blocking and choreography into an abstract network of lines, which permits subtle and often surprising deployments of the actors. From this evolves a complex vocabulary of movement that draws on everything from various twentieth-century dance crazes—especially in the "Ballade vom angenehmen Leben" (shimmy) and "Kanonen-Song" (foxtrot)—through break dancing and beyond to cleverly suggest violent contact sports. The visual and choreographic allusions to various stagings of the "Cell Block Tango" from *Chicago* in the "Zuhälterballade" make for plausible intertextuality.

The beautifully executed staging and sound concept, products of intensive collaboration among director, conductor, and actors, is carried out through the focused and richly varied interpretation of the musical numbers. It demonstrates both what Weill's score makes possible, and requires.

Nils Grosch
Universität Salzburg

Editor's note: Although the theater's requests for reassignment of songs and non-disruptive transpositions were approved by the publisher in advance, the drastic octave transpositions downward of both Mrs. Peachum's and Jenny's solo numbers were not authorized.

Der Silbersee

Opera Ballet Vlaanderen
Antwerp and Ghent

Premiere: 18 September 2021

After a shutdown of a full year and a half, Opera Vlaanderen offered a new production of *Der Silbersee* directed by Ersan Mondtag, a well-known German film director who attracted much favorable comment for his deeply personal interpretation of Schreker's *Der Schmied von Gent*, staged at Opera Vlaanderen early in 2020. His rendering of *Der Silbersee* aims at first for a strongly political tone, albeit somewhat oblique, but later throws caution to the wind in a joyful frenzy.

Mondtag starts from the historical fact that the work premiered simultaneously in February 1933 in three German cities (Leipzig, Magdeburg, and Erfurt) and was soon closed down by the Nazis. From this he fashions a premise for the present production: *Der Silbersee* is being staged in a Flemish theater in 2033, also a time of growing extremism. In a self-referential twist (*mise en abyme*), the director—who also plays Olim—discusses with the actors the most effective way to stage the work.

The score, performed from the new version prepared for the Kurt Weill Edition, is treated with great respect, but the same cannot be said for Georg Kaiser's dialogue, which has been augmented by a modernized text in a mixture of English and Dutch, created by the dramaturgs Till Briegleb and Piet De Volder. The attempts to amuse are not particularly successful—a bit lame, indeed vulgar in places—with references to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, mockery of political correctness and cancel culture, and the rather aggressive adoption of a queer angle (Olim and Severin are transformed into gay icons), all mixed together with scatology and crude jokes. The production is just as far out visually, in both the sets (particularly the façade of a temple decorated with statues that are not in the least classical) and costumes, which draw on everything from ancient Egypt to modern science fiction, with some weird-looking oversized rats with red eyes thrown in along the way.

The new script makes the show much longer than it needs to be (3 hours and 15 minutes), but the anti-fascist message of the work has lost neither its force, relevance, nor humor. Above all, the incisiveness and jubilant vivacity of Weill's score, beautifully conducted by the young Belgian Karel Deseure, sweeps everything before it. The choruses, orchestra, and singers are uniformly excellent, in particular the young Spanish tenor Daniel Arnaldos (Severin), Dutch soprano Hanne Roos (Fennimore), and American tenor James Kryshak (Lottery Agent and Baron von Laur). The actors are no slouches, either, led by Benny Claessens (Olim), Elsie de Brauw (Frau von Luber), and Marjan De Schutter, who delivers Fennimore's spoken dialogue.

Even if we do not admire every element of the present staging of *Der Silbersee*, this production serves as a pointed reminder to programmers that Weill has left other treasures to rediscover. And that the music may speak to us as effectively today as the libretti.

Nicolas Blanmont
***Opera* Magazine**

Olim (Benny Claessens) and Severin (Daniel Arnaldos)

PHOTO: ANNEMIE AUGUSTIJNS

From the press:

"While the visuals were impressive, where the evening proved problematic was in the pacing … it dragged just at the point at which it should have crackled with energy. Similarly, the social context and political implications of the work, particularly in the dark times we live now, felt underexplored."
Operatraveller.com, 19 September 2021

"Of all the liberties Ersan Mondtag takes as director of this new *Silbersee*, the greatest is turning the whole story into an account of setting his production in 2033, infusing the work with the reality of the near future. The action is interrupted several times by discussions among director, stage manager, and actors of whether they may, or must, criticize the powerful or the system. Just before the end, the outside world penetrates the theatrical bubble, as rocks fly and glass breaks. Mondtag shakes the fourth wall, and why shouldn't he? With the whole world's prospects darkening so quickly, can we even put on an opera as if it were nothing out of the ordinary? …

"The juxtaposition of frequently changing sets … may get on our nerves as scenographic overload and self-importance, or perhaps it is exactly the opposite: an ironic commentary on the maddening excesses of opera décor and staging."
Holger Noltze, *Opernwelt*, November 2021

"German director Ersan Mondtag puts so many different layers into *Der Silbersee* that you are never quite sure how to interpret the spectacle on stage or what exactly you are looking at. …

"Not everything works equally well, but *Der Silbersee* is a production not to be missed. Some will go home exultant, others annoyed. Mondtag knows no middle ground. What remains intact, however, is Weill's impossibly good music… it always caresses the ears."
Koen Van Boxem, *De Tijd*, 20 September 2021