

Lady in the Dark

Volksooper Wien

Matthias Davids, director
James Holmes, conductor

Premiere: 18 December 2021

Although widely acknowledged as a masterpiece of American musical theater, *Lady in the Dark* is famously difficult to produce. Making fierce musical and dramatic demands of its lead actors, chorus, dancers, and orchestra, and requiring at least four different settings, the piece is a sophisticated, complex spoken play into which are inserted three (actually four) one-act operas. Taking psychoanalysis as its subject and dramaturgical method, it puts its heroine Liza Elliott, a fashion magazine editor suffering from burnout, through the Freudian wringer. With its conflict between romance and career laid in traditional gender terms, the piece is often considered dated and hopelessly sexist. These challenges are addressed and overcome in the new German-language Vienna Volksooper production by director Matthias Davids, conductor James Holmes, and a stellar cast, which proves not only the brilliance of what is arguably the first concept musical, but also its stage-worthiness eighty years after its premiere. It also proves, for those intent on bifurcating Weill's career, that the Broadway Weill is as skilled, dazzling, and innovative as the Berlin Weill.

Matthias Davids first directed a superbly realized *Lady in the Dark* in 2011 at the Staatsoper Hannover. Ten years later, his Vienna production is even better, cast more strongly, with peerless musical direction. Most important, working in Freud's hometown, Davids treats character psychology with utmost seriousness and succeeds in making the notoriously problematic book by Moss Hart work as the cohesive, deeply affecting play it is. Davids proves that you don't need to turn Dr. Brooks into a woman—sometimes done in the U.S. in an attempt to offset the play's gender politics—to stage the piece that Weill, Hart, and Ira Gershwin wrote with care, understanding, and compassion. It's the first production of *Lady* I've seen that gives the book its true emotional heft while allowing the musical dream sequences fully to realize their seductive, hallucinatory beauty.



PHOTO: PETRA MOSER

Among the excellent cast, pride of place goes to the remarkable Liza, Julia Koci, a lyric soprano who can belt when she needs to and whose tortured portrayal of a woman in crisis has real backbone. She is matched by Christian Graf, who makes Charley Johnson a feisty yet dashing opponent. Jakob Semotan avoids easy gay stereotypes in his portrayal of Russell Paxton and delivers a dynamite "Tchaikowsky," complete with spirited encore. The Australian Ben Connor takes on Randy Curtis but does little, despite his adept singing, to lift this admittedly clichéd role above caricature (his American-accented German was too obtrusive for my taste).

The final scene of *Lady in the Dark* presents a unique challenge. Thanks to psychoanalysis, Liza has tamed her inner demons, remembered the lyric to her childhood song, "My Ship," and made peace with Charley, but the script does not deliver the romantic happy ending promised by most mid-century musicals. In the original, Liza is ready to hand over the reins of the magazine to Charley, but Davids and company opt for a more creditable solution: equal power sharing. Most intriguingly, the production provides more than a hint that Charley is gay, removing any possibility of romance. The resulting affable working partnership between colleagues puts a savvy twist on the ending, eliminating Liza's subordinate status.

As fine as the *mise-en-scène* is, James Holmes's conducting is even more revelatory. I have never heard Weill's musical gestures rendered more forcefully, the tempos so perfectly judged, and most important, the dance rhythms articulated with a clarity and power rarely heard in German or Austrian opera houses. The rhythms that drive each dream sequence—rumba, bolero, and march—were wonderfully propulsive and the Volksooper orchestra played with real virtuosity and swing. My principal reservations about the production concerned the set and costume design, by Hans Kudlich and Susanne Hubrich respectively, which were sometimes too busy and fussy for a piece that deliberately goes off in so many different directions. The use of a large mirrored panel above the stage and giant couch in Dr. Brooks's office, which neatly infantilizes Liza, were tremendously evocative. But the fragmentation of the mirror, while thematically correct, was distracting, and the costumes, especially in the office scenes, were a dog's breakfast of different colors and styles. On the other hand, the Circus Dream, lorded over by a giant bikini-doll, was wonderfully surreal; there and elsewhere, the performances consistently overcame the sometimes chaotic visual patchwork. These quibbles do not compromise the production. Rather, the Volksooper deserves only the highest praise for engaging an inspired team that truly knows how to make *Lady* live again.

David Savran
Berlin

PHOTO: BARBARA PÁLFFY



A gigantic, licentious doll
looms over the Circus Dream

Die sieben Todsünden and other works

London Symphony Orchestra
Sir Simon Rattle, conductor

28 April 2022

Under the expert and committed guidance of Sir Simon Rattle, the London Symphony Orchestra with a splendid team of vocal soloists gave a wide-ranging concert of works by Weill at London's Barbican Centre.

The programme was built around *Die sieben Todsünden* (1933), which made up the second half of the evening. Before this treasured masterpiece we heard a striking variety of works. First, from Weill's Berlin years, the rarely performed *Vom Tod im Wald* (1927) and the familiar and ever-welcome *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik* (1929). Second, from his American career, two of the *Four Walt Whitman Songs* (1942) and "Lonely House" from *Street Scene* (1946).

The songs were taken by two members of the *Sins* family quartet. Ross Ramgobin, his beautiful voice perhaps rather too lightweight for this particular number, sang "Beat! Beat! Drums!" with real understanding and energy. Andrew Staples, a much-praised and sought-after tenor, director, and filmmaker sang "Dirge for Two Veterans" and "Lonely House" with intensity and sensitivity, and some truly impressive quiet high notes. Florian Boesch, the quartet's Mother, confidently delivered Weill's challengingly non-tonal, expressionist setting of Brecht's grim *Vom Tod im Wald* with skill and color, his rich voice exploring and communicating both the sustained and lively phrases with focus and power.

Producing the "ballet-chanté" *Die sieben Todsünden* in concert has an extra difficulty: one of the protagonists says almost nothing. Anna I and Anna II, one a singer/actress, the other (apart from a few spoken words) a silent dancer: a split personality, or—as Anna I describes them—"sisters." In this performance the singers were in front of the orchestra and there was no attempt at any kind of interpretive staging; it was strictly a render-

ing of the music and text, as if for a sound recording. And with no Anna II, Magdalena Kožená was obliged to respond to her own questions! For these she adopted a more casual, nonchalant tone of voice to help us understand that she was impersonating someone else, or (as the fact of their having the same name suggests) revealing another side of her own character.

Kožená, a superb artist, is a different kind of *chanteuse* from Lotte Lenya and sings the part lyrically, though without ever sacrificing clarity of the text. She is a master of expression and vocally fully in command of her instrument—hers was a thoroughly *musical* performance. Alessandro Fisher joined the other three men to form her urging, cajoling family; they sang with energy and fervor, identifying entirely with the sentiments of the text without underlining the irony. The implicit (sometimes explicit) sarcasm in Brecht's texts is best left for the listener to sense without making it obvious. Weill's imaginative writing for the four male voices was delicious. There are glorious moments of four-part harmony (such as much of "Gluttony," almost like a glee club) and other moments when the family splits into two duos (the beginning of "Anger," for example). Three members of the family also have important solo moments, which were sung with warmth and intense expression. And the delightful passage in "Pride" where the family joins the orchestra in providing backing for Anna (although according to the text, they are very far apart geographically!) was beautifully managed. Such questions of balance and mutually supporting expressions had been carefully considered and prepared.

Rattle's devotion to this music is well-known; he made a recording of the *Sins* with Elise Ross many years ago and has conducted it frequently. He knows the style intimately and on this occasion his enthusiasm transmitted itself immediately to the large and appreciative audience as much as to the orchestra. The concert opened with *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik*, and at once his understanding and attention to detail were apparent. The orchestra's fine wind players together with percussion, banjo, and guitar played with exuberant rhythm and warm melodiousness, with fierce abandon and melancholy thoughtfulness. The instrumentalists of the slightly smaller wind ensemble required for *Vom Tod im Wald* took on the intense seriousness and somber brooding of this remarkable score but did not fail to show the virtuosity needed for the urgently pressing moments.

The string sections, possibly larger than necessary, came onto the platform for the other works and added their luster and richness. The texture became occasionally too luxurious, but Rattle's attention to the quality of accompaniment was clear throughout the evening. In addition to the outstanding singers, rhythmic verve, variety of color, and balance within the overall sound ensured that this concert was not only a fitting tribute to one of the twentieth century's masters but will be remembered as such by all who heard it.

Lionel Friend
London



Magdalena Kožená and
Sir Simon Rattle

The London Symphony plans to issue a live recording of the concert on its own label. Details to be announced.

Happy End

Victorian Opera

Matthew Lutton, director

Phoebe Briggs, conductor

Premiere: 23 March 2022

Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny

IOpera and Melbourne Opera

Suzanne Chaundy, director

Peter Tregear, conductor

Premiere: 1 May 2022

Melbourne, Australia has enjoyed a bounty of Weill/Brecht/Hauptmann this fall, with productions of *Happy End* at the Victorian Opera and *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* in a co-production of the Melbourne Opera and IOpera (both performed in English). As Australia entered a federal election campaign, both productions proudly broadcast their anti-capitalist credentials and sought to emphasize these works' continued topicality nearly a century after their composition.

Happy End hit the stage first in a production by Matthew Lutton conducted by Phoebe Briggs, notably the first foray of either into this repertoire. *Happy End* is something of black sheep among the Weill/Brecht/Hauptmann collaborations. Since its premiere, critics have noted the difficulty in reconciling the broad, if not heavy-handed, humor in the work's parody of Hollywood clichés with the biting social critique in the song lyrics, and further in reconciling the lyrics with moments of blunt political messaging. However, while the stage work remains less known, the songs have become evergreens, and at numbers like "Bilbao-Song" and "Surabaya-Johnny," one could hear muffled sighs of recognition in the audience.

Lutton emphasized in interviews that *Happy End* is not an American musical but a German musical about an imagined America, yet the production resolved many of the work's challenges by leaning into its Broadway-like elements. It preserved the original, early twentieth-century Chicago setting with

a cast largely composed of musical theater performers who deployed broad period accents straight out of a mid-century Hollywood gangster film. In a typical Broadway configuration, the two romantic leads (Adam Murphy as Bill Cracker and Lucy Maunder as Lilian Holiday) mostly played straight while the rest of the cast hammed it up. I couldn't help but think of *Guys and Dolls*, a canonical American musical with the same basic story.

This approach was largely successful, and audiences and local critics responded with effusive praise of both the humor and the overall political message. A major challenge of such an approach, however, is negotiating shifts from the general campiness of the production to the serious tone of the songs and the occasional blunt political statement. Many of these transitions were handled quite smoothly, like the "Bilbao-Song," whose message about gentrification speaks clearly to contemporary politics, or the "Sailors' Tango," which Maunder performed to devastating effect. There were, however, moments of anachronism which I felt did not quite capture the Brechtian experience of jarring the audience out of passive viewership and into critical contemplation of the political framework behind the action. Instead, they simply felt out of place, the political message defanged by the otherwise thoroughgoing camp humor. For instance, Euan Fistrovic Doidge (Sam Wurlitzer) was one of the most successful members of the cast in capturing the Weill/Brecht sound—that cabaret-like distance of a singer not just singing a song, but performing the act of singing a song (it seemed clear that other performers were aiming for this effect as well, but it was hard not to hear the Broadway in their voices). Nevertheless, his characterization throughout the rest of the work was so exaggerated that his rendition of the "Mandelay-Song" hardly felt connected to the action or to his character. Similarly, Ali McGregor as the Fly stole nearly every scene she was in with her over-the-top delivery, but that made the serious turn in her final song and political speech unconvincing.

In the end, I was left wondering what political message audiences would take away from what was billed as an "anti-capitalist musical comedy." While some songs drew out elements of the plot that speak to contemporary issues (gentrification in "Bilbao-Song," mistreatment of women in "Surabaya-Johnny"), others seemed to be rendered safe for contemporary white-collar, middle-class society by subsuming them into the general camp tone.



The Salvation Army gathers in *Happy End*

PHOTO: JEFF BUSBY

Audiences responded with hearty laughter at the end of the work as the gangsters and Salvation Army united to fight capitalism and the gangsters taught the Salvation Army “soldiers” how to operate guns, but the main reason they laughed was that the whole scene seemed to come out of nowhere. As a spectator, my first instinct was to understand it as yet another ridiculous plot twist, not a serious message. Any sense of confusion, however, was quickly dispelled by a spirited reprise of “Bilbao-Song” during the applause, leaving the audience on the high note of one of the work’s best-known songs, notably one in which politics is tempered by a hefty dose of nostalgia, thus dispersing the political message in our own cultural nostalgia for the 1920s. Overall, the production was an undeniable success, with strong performances by all involved, but a success achieved, in part, by choices that also dulled the work’s political bite.

Several weeks later, Melbourne Opera and IOpera’s joint production of *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* premiered, appropriately enough, on 1 May. The first professional production of the opera in Australia in forty years operated on a notably different scale from *Happy End*. While Victorian Opera is a state opera company, Melbourne Opera and IOpera are both independent local companies that receive no state subsidies. Over the last twenty years, Melbourne Opera has established a reputation for excellence despite its limited resources, while IOpera is a newer company with a focus on fostering local young talent.

The production was helmed by director Suzanne Chaundy and conductor Peter Tregear. Chaundy is a well-established opera director, and as a scholar-performer, Tregear boasts an impressive résumé of scholarly publications on the music of the Weimar Republic, especially that of Ernst Krenek; his conducting credits include the Australian premiere of Krenek’s *Jonny spielt auf* in 2019 and the U.K. premiere of Max Brand’s *Maschinist Hopkins* in 2001.

Under Tregear’s baton, orchestra and cast delivered masterful performances. Unlike *Happy End*, most of this cast had operatic backgrounds. While the singing style veered too much toward the operatic for my taste, such performance practice is well supported by Weill’s commentary on the work, as Tregear argues in an extensive “Background” included in the program booklet. Small touches along the way had a powerful impact, such as when Jenny (sung by Antoinette Halloran) used her suitcase as an on-stage bass drum to accompany herself in the “Alabama-Song.” This production also brought out the comic elements of the libretto, but struck a good balance with the seriousness of the work, so that the comedy never seemed to undermine the message.

Jeremy Sams’s recent English version of the text, with its refreshingly blunt renderings of the opera’s litanies of sex and violence and its memorable one-liners (“So get kicked in the face if you want to. As for me, I would rather stand and kick”), made the text accessible and gave the performance a modern feel. Numerous production decisions further brought out the contemporary relevance of the opera’s political message. Chaundy explains, for instance, that “the poor theatre esthetic” of Brecht, with its rejection of spectacular effects and naturalistic scenery, allowed the producing opera companies to make a virtue of their limited means, and that the use of a range of accents emphasizes that “this story is as much about [Australia] as anywhere.” Costumes, scenic design, and other elements largely reflected a setting circa 1930, but with anachronistic elements added to underscore the



The Lumberjacks—Bill (Christopher Tonkin), Joe (Darcy Carroll), Jimmy (James Egglestone), and Jack (Fraser Findlay)—arrive in Mahagonny

PHOTO: MELBOURNE OPERA

timelessness of the political message. This effect was more successful as the anachronism increased (and was thus more obviously deliberate) in the second half, and I would have appreciated even more throughout.

As with several other recent Melbourne Opera productions, video (here by Chris Hocking) played a central role. An old-timey animation reminiscent of 1930s Walt Disney was used to establish settings, provide background information, or, in a humorous moment, trace the progress of the hurricane towards Mahagonny and its diversion on a weather map, while original live video was kept to a minimum. Stock video of recent events did much to underscore the political relevance of the work, an effect that also picked up notably in the second half. In the final chorus of the opera, clips from such diverse events as the recent Australian bush fires and floods, anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine demonstrations, sex work legalization demonstrations, and Trump rallies all made appearances. While this grab-bag approach to staging and video clearly linked specific elements of the opera to pressing contemporary issues, there was, as far as I could tell, no overarching political message to the production. Or perhaps that was the point: to suggest a wide range of meanings and allow spectators to find their own specific political messages.

Ultimately, Melbourne Opera and IOpera’s production is a testament to the enduring relevance of *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* and to the tenacity of the two companies to produce excellent work on limited means. Alongside Victorian Opera’s demonstration of the viability of *Happy End* as a work for mainstream companies, one can only hope more Australian companies will take up Weill, Brecht, and Hauptmann’s works, and we don’t have to wait another forty years to see *Mahagonny* again.

John Gabriel
University of Melbourne

Mahagonny Songspiel & Die sieben Todsünden

Red Line Productions

Constantine Costi, director

Brian Castles-Onion, conductor

Premiere: 2 April 2022

Constantine Costi's production of *The Seven Deadly Sins* and *Mahagonny Songspiel* powerfully demonstrates that Peter Brook's "rough" theater need not be shabby. Performed in the sixty-seat basement theater of the Old Fitz Hotel in Woolloomooloo, Australia, the double bill makes a big statement in a small room.

Mahagonny Songspiel was Weill, Brecht, and Hauptmann's first collaboration, a cantata of six songs with orchestral interludes, written for the Baden-Baden festival of new German chamber music in 1927. Six years later, driven into exile by the Nazis and living in Paris, Weill received a commission from Edward James to compose *The Seven Deadly Sins*, his final full-length collaboration with Brecht. The works make effective companion pieces, and Costi has combined them into a tight sixty-five-minute show.

Designer Charles Davis, avoiding the now-tiresome clichés of video screens and live feeds, embraces the roughness of the Old Fitz. Through a beaded bamboo curtain, the audience enters what could be another room in the pub (which, in fact, it is). The space is divided between a mezzanine that crosses it and the main playing area on the same level as the audience. A plant wilts behind an upright piano stage right and two beer kegs rest haphazardly beneath a yellow steel stepladder stage left. Worn, gray carpet tiles cover the stage, which also act as effective sound dampening. Ensemble Apex, the seventeen-piece orchestra, fills the upstage area and mezzanine, but their presence, while imposing, does not overwhelm, and they enlarge the room visually and aurally. Under the baton of Simon Bruckard (who replaced Brian Castles-Onion early in the run), and needing no electronic amplification, the orchestra and singers blend with greater clarity and balance than in many sound-mixed shows. The mood created is like the yesterday of "all tomorrow's parties" (as Nico once sang with the Velvet Underground).

This worn, everywhere-but-nowhere place is the setting for *The Seven Deadly Sins*. Two sisters, both called Anna (implying they are one person), travel through seven U.S. cities in their quest to buy their family "a little house." In each city they encounter a "sin" ironically reframed as a transgression against capitalism. The two Annas, sung by the full-voiced mezzo-soprano Margaret Trubiano (Anna I) and danced by the expressive Allie Graham (Anna II), enact a series of encounters where Anna I urges Anna II to suppress her own needs and morals in order to earn money.

Trubiano and Graham interact with their family, performed by a male quartet, who comment on the action and echo Anna I's arguments. Weill had experimented with the male quartet earlier in *Mahagonny Songspiel*, drawing on the German *Männerchor*



PHOTO: ROBERT CATTO

Dancer Allie Graham surrounded by singers in *Mahagonny Songspiel*; clockwise from lower left: Nicholas Jones, Anthony Mackey, Andy Moran, Benjamin Rasheed, Margaret Trubiano, Roberta Diamond

and possibly influenced by a popular American vocal quartet of the era, The Revelers. Nicholas Jones (first tenor), Benjamin Rasheed (second tenor), Andy Moran (baritone), and Anthony Mackey (bass) provide a muscular theatrical chorus in both voice and body. This musical relationship between female singer(s)—Trubiano is joined in *Mahagonny* by soprano Roberta Diamond—and male chorus provides a formal link between the two works. These singers have significant operatic experience and, in both voice and presence, fill and enlarge the stage. Their strength is matched choreographically by Graham's rag-doll physicality, which animates two dance solos at the end of *Mahagonny*.

Costi's direction uses The Old Fitz's limits to shape a fluid and agile scenography. The action occurs across the downstage area and on the stepladder, with old pub tables and chairs being brought on for extra levels. These are used throughout to form expressive tableaux and movement pieces choreographed by Shannon Burns. To give one example, as the prologue to *Mahagonny* plays, half the band packs up and leaves, while the cast transforms into shabby lounge-lizards. In this seedy bar at the end of the world, Diamond sings "Alabama-Song" on a portable revolve resembling a bar table. She is joined by Trubiano in the second verse, and their slowed-down performance both pays homage to Lenya and parodies her. They barely sing the verses, as if they are doing it "just for the money" (as Brecht said of Karl Valentin). When the chorus splits into a round, two bar patrons stumble from their table and drunkenly revolve the women as they sing. The room seems to spin with them; it's a rough but effective device.

The Old Fitz Theatre always demands imaginative staging and Costi and his team have set the bar high for independent theater in Sydney. It was a privilege, also, to experience performers of this quality in such intimate proximity. This production shows how, without resorting to trickery, intelligent stagecraft and superb musicianship make great theater.

Glen McGillivray
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Kurt Weill's America

Naomi Graber
(New York: Oxford, 2021)

ISBN: 978-0-19-090658-0

Early in her book *Kurt Weill's America*, musicologist Naomi Graber admits that Weill's musicals are "hardly ... typical" (8). This is indeed the case, and Graber's book solidifies our understanding of why this is so in precisely stated, historically grounded terms.

Graber discusses eight Broadway musicals, two musical films, and four unusual stage works. Projects that were produced, unproduced, and substantially transformed (a radio opera turned *Lehrstück*) are considered side by side in similar terms. In each case, the plot is briefly recounted, the making of the show is told using mostly archival sources—Graber enumerates in the text or tables which songs and scenes were written, cut, re-ordered—and subsequent reviews are excerpted. An interpretive section follows, teasing out larger themes in each work related to American cultural or musical history. For instance, *Lady in the Dark* opens up a discussion of bisexuality and women in the early 1940s.

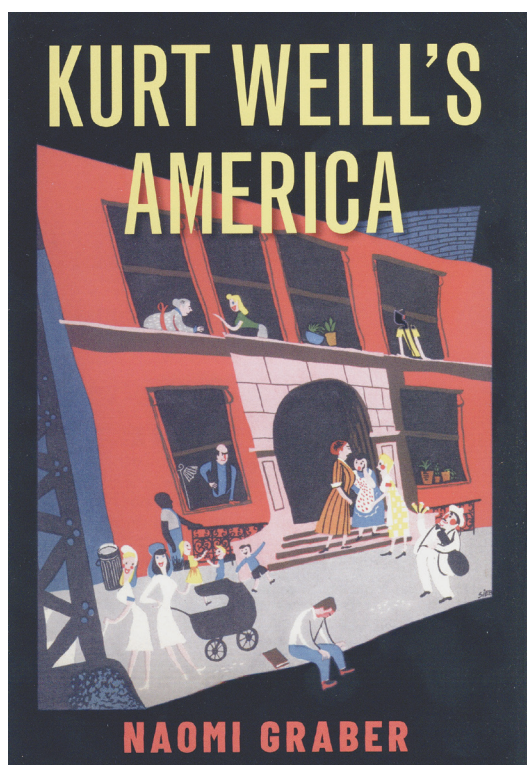
Graber rightly acknowledges that it is "hard to speak of an 'author' of a Broadway show" (10). And yet, most histories of the genre foreground particular authorial figures—names like Gershwin, Hammerstein, Sondheim, and Bennett come to mind—as stronger than others. Weill, it seems, never quite rose to the position of a strong authorial figure, at least in the sources Graber cites. Weill wrote the music but it's hard to tell how much of the lyrics, dialogue, narrative, characters, or choreo-

graphic content of a given show he also shaped. And so, a larger question arises in this survey of Weill's American output: does analysis of the lyrics or dialogue in a Weill show tell us much of anything about Weill himself?

Reading Graber's production histories, it is striking how seldom Weill worked with top commercial collaborators. His Hollywood experience was perfunctory at best: songs for just two films. The nearest Weill got to the major Hollywood musical production units was the decidedly minor *Where Do We Go from Here?* for Twentieth Century Fox—not starring any of Fox's top musical stars and with a B-picture running time of under eighty minutes. Graber treats Weill's score for *Railroads on Parade*, a spectacle competing with the Aquacade at the 1939 and 1940 World's Fair, as a significant encounter for the composer with American folk song and the start of "Weill's shift towards the political center" (114). I wonder if he just needed the money (Graber nods towards this possibility).

On Broadway, Weill virtually always worked with collaborators known for serious plays who expressed an intent to "reform" or elevate the musical as a genre, with the quest for "opera—or something vaguely operatic" always in the air (169). Weill's first Broadway effort, *Johnny Johnson*, was produced by the Group Theatre, an offshoot of the Theatre Guild, and he was later closely associated with the Playwrights' Producing Company (a producing collective of creatives—with not especially deep pockets—who also critiqued each other's work; Weill eventually became a member). Outside of his two shows with lyricist Ira Gershwin and *Love Life* with Alan Jay Lerner, he often worked with musical-theater novices, whether lyricist/bookwriter Maxwell Anderson on *Knickerbocker Holiday*, or lyricist Ogden Nash and director Elia Kazan on *One Touch of Venus*. And commercial producers were never all that interested in Weill either. Graber explains that Billy Rose, despite previous work with Weill on Jewish projects during the war, passed on *Lost in the Stars* because, in his words, while "a distinguished job and a fine thing for the theater ... its commercial chances are only so-so." Rodgers and Hammerstein declined as well (261).

And yet, Graber also affords the reader a few glimpses of Weill thinking like Irving Berlin—with an eye towards the proper "exploitation" of popular music intended to be commercially successful. From his first Broadway score, Weill absorbed the need to leave the audience "humming the music in leaving the theater" (57) and he critiqued the marketing of intended song hits and shows, counseling producer Cheryl Crawford to model the ad campaign for *One Touch of Venus* on that of *Oklahoma!*. Graber traces similar strategic thinking on Weill's part about the "marketability" of his various identities as German, as Jewish, or as a German Jew. Extrapolating from the content and the historical context of the shows for which Weill wrote music, Graber finds a meandering line: from anti-war to patriotic to critical of postwar consensus culture and facile notions of community (for example, in comparing the "chromatic, dark, ambiguous" (125) opening of *Down in the Valley*, a 1945 folk-song opera for radio, to the contemporaneous *Oklahoma!*). Graber's careful, contextual approach presents Weill negotiating American theater and American culture across a tumultuous era.



Todd Decker
Washington University in St. Louis

365 Tage mit Kurt Weill: Ein Almanach

compiled by **Andreas Eichhorn**
(Hildesheim: Olms, 2022)

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"This book is not a 'Weill biography,'" Andreas Eichhorn explains in the foreword to this attractively produced and richly illustrated volume. "Yet it is based on documentary material that is fundamental for any biographical portrayal." The publications on which he has drawn are listed at the end; there are twenty-three in all, each assigned its own abbreviation for ease of reference. Quoted extensively, of course, is Weill's correspondence as well as critical reaction documented in press reviews. A separate section entitled *Literatur* lists just eight titles, including the German-language edition of *A Life in Pictures and Documents* by Farneth, Juchem, and Stein, published in 2000; Weill's *Gesammelte Schriften* (Collected Writings), also from 2000; three of the numerous Weill-Lenya books; and David Drew's collection of critical writings about Weill, *Über Kurt Weill*, that appeared in 1975. Unlike the new *Weill-Almanach*, all of these earlier publications adhere to a conventional chronological ordering of their materials, as does Eichhorn's brief *Chronologie* at the end of the volume, which also serves as one of two indices.

The form of the almanac has obliged Eichhorn to provide entries—usually just one, occasionally two—for each day of the year. These typically consist of excerpts from his sources; some are descriptions and commentaries written by Eichhorn himself. Here are four examples from the beginning and end of the volume. The first item, selected for 1 January, is a letter from Weill proudly announcing to his parents in 1926 that his new opera *Royal Palace* "represents a significant step forward in my development." On the very next day, 2 January, the reader is cast back to 1867 to read that "Albert Weill, the father of the composer, is born in Kippenheim (town in the Rhine valley, 40 km north of Freiburg). He hails from a rabbinical family based in that region." The two items selected for 30 December comprise a long quotation from Weill's 1931 essay titled "Ewigkeitswert?" (Eternal Value?) and a brief mention of the death of Albert Weill (who outlived his son by nine months) in 1950. The very last item, selected for 31 December, is a substantial, two-paragraph press clipping from a review of a performance of *Mahagonny* that took place in Paris in 1932. The almanac's year thus concludes, not at the end of Weill's life, but merely a dozen or so years into his career, with eighteen more to go.

Written by André George for *Les nouvelles littéraires*, the *Mahagonny* review leaves the reader with an evocative description of one of the composer's best-known songs, capturing salient technical features of his style and alluding to a key romantic inspiration of his musical formation and esthetic—namely, Richard Wagner. "Among the many admirable passages," George writes in the concluding paragraph, "see, for example, the 'Alabama-Song' blues, where the shocks and sneers of jazz suddenly dissolve into

the rising cantilena, the cry of the heart: 'Oh! moon of Alabama,' wafting over mysterious, deep basses—'night hymn' of the poor, *Dreigroschentristan, Tristan de quat' sous!*" (The English translation of the original French is quoted here from the Kurt Weill Edition.)

In the foreword Eichhorn details the method and rationale that informed the selection of entries. On the one hand, he applied what he calls a "purely formal filter" through which items are selected based solely on their calendar date. To a certain extent this made him "rely initially on chance." On the other hand, subjective factors nonetheless played an important part, guided by two criteria: 1) bringing to bear "a multiplicity of aspects in order to reveal social, cultural, and political connections with which the unique, historical phenomenon of Weill was (and is) intertwined"; 2) making the excerpts from the sources "accessible to the non-specialist while also offering occasional entertainment." Instead of constructing his own narrative, Eichhorn wants users to engage with "a montage of scattered biographical materials" and derive from it their own "totality" of "a biographical constellation." With a nod to Walter Benjamin and his esthetics of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, he expects that reception will be "distracted" and have its "productive side," regardless of whether the almanac is read in a "linear" or a "selective" fashion.

"Distraction" instead of "contemplative immersion," "montage" instead of "fusion of elements"—these precepts call to mind not only Benjamin, but also Bertolt Brecht and epic theater. And yet, as the playwright himself put it, using a favorite culinary metaphor, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating." The *Weill-Almanach* provides a buffet of diverse materials, appetizingly prepared and presented, with which readers can form their own image of the composer's life and times. Bon appétit!

Stephen Hinton
Stanford University

