

SEVENTY-FIVE CENTS

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THEATRE ARTS

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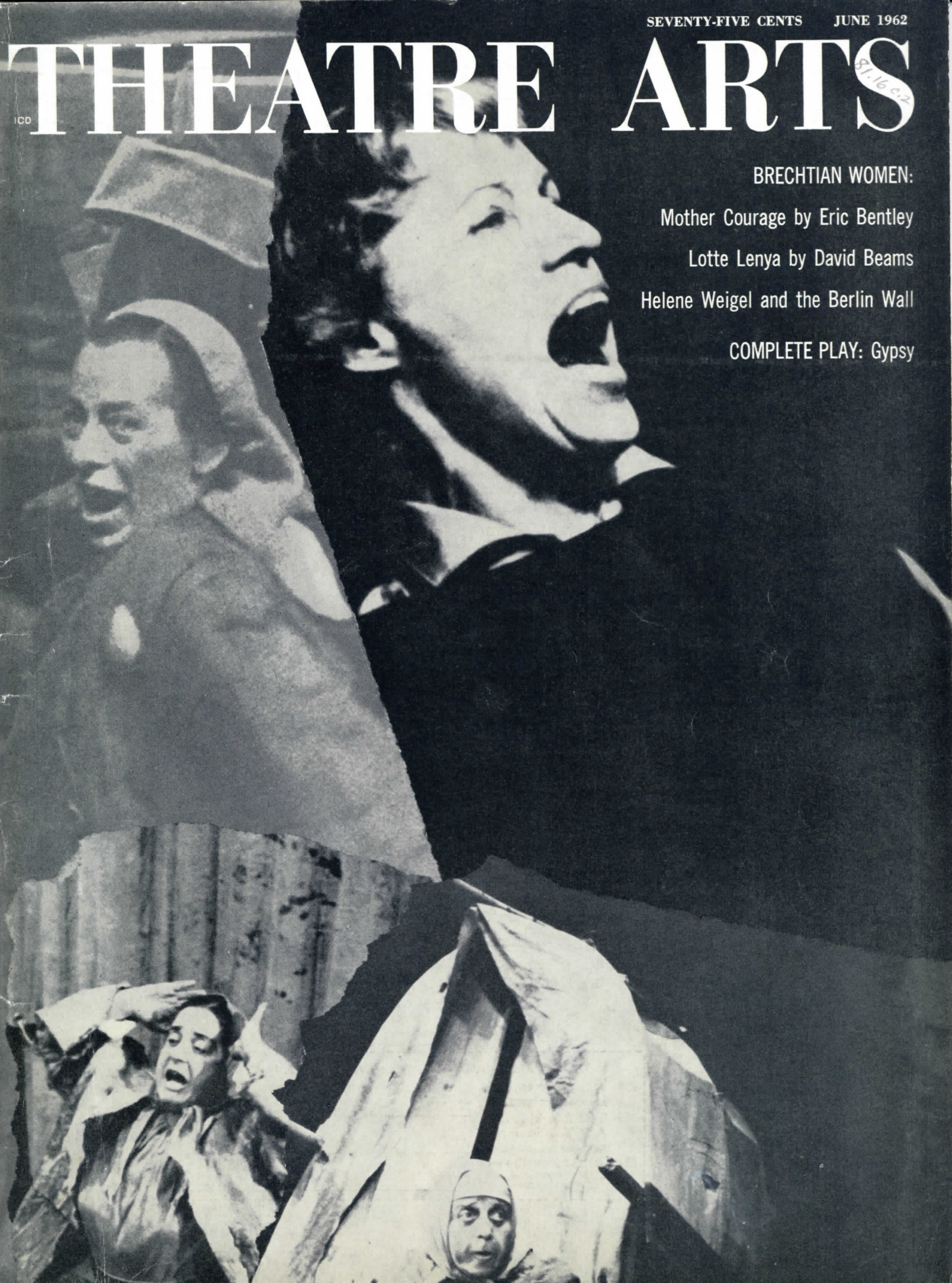
BRECHTIAN WOMEN:

Mother Courage by Eric Bentley

Lotte Lenya by David Beams

Helene Weigel and the Berlin Wall

COMPLETE PLAY: Gypsy







LOTTE LENYA

Devoted to Brecht, but not devout, the perfect

Weillian evokes a pertinent and unforgotten world:

"Oh, show us the way to the next whiskey-bar

Oh, don't ask why—oh, don't ask why!

For we must find the next whiskey-bar

For if we don't find the next whiskey-bar

I tell you we must die—I tell you we must die—

I tell you—I tell you—I tell you we must die—"

by David Beams

It is 1954, but for a few pennies Off Broadway we are inspecting Edwardian Soho, a brothel etched in fog. The shock of recognition will come; at the moment there is only the shock of Bert Brecht's jeering vision, dressing everyone equally in fine irony. And what are we to make of Kurt Weill's stale, nifty dance tunes, their peaked sweetness defying us to be fine even in irony, their acrid harmonies forbidding even nostalgia?

Yet there is something familiar about Gin Mill Jenny at the bordello. Topped by a mess of carrot-root hair, her face is long and bold, high-boned with tilting eyebrows and a red slash of mouth. Black-striped purple binds the pale, sagging chest, and there is a jet ribbon around her neck and a

heart with purple stones. Incurable rhythms lurk in the lean body slung indolently into view, one arm sinuous along the raven skirt. With a draftsmanship as thrifty and merciless as his own, Lotte Lenya has re-created a Toulouse-Lautrec, the satirical, foot-lighted canvases of Montmartre clowns, tarts and tired divas. It is not only an unerring clue to the impudent new world of Brecht but a kind of last collaboration with him, by which Lautrec joins Gay, Villon, Kipling, Piscator and cabaret in the Brechtian hash. No painter was more of the theatre, and Bert Brecht would be the first to authorize the blowzy poster Jenny, in the tradition of his own placards, unfolding his new Moulin Rouge.

In the current Off Broadway hit *Brecht on Brecht*, Lenya does Jenny's songs, the pulsating tramp of Mutter Courage and a visionary speech of St. Joan of the Stockyards in a simple jumper and shirt, neutral and distancing. The analogy to Lautrec is no longer needed, only the stark eyes mist-

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← Lenya as Jenny in the 1954 New York production of *The Threepenny Opera*. She last sang the role in Los Angeles, 1961.

ing for the ship with eight sails—"und fünfzig Kanonen." For this Brechtians have Lenya mainly to thank. The current show, with the six actors seated on high stools, sometimes resembles a tea party at which the Mad Hatter, Brecht, is catered to but not allowed to get out of hand. But Lotte Lenya, pursuing her task of a decade now, in Robert Brustein's words "cold, metallic, seemingly detached from the proceedings, conveys the steel and ice that were in Brecht."

When Kurt Weill died in 1950, Lenya's task was before her. Broadway had cherished the balding, chunky little man with thick glasses over intent saucer eyes, the musician with a shy, lovable personality. But one half of Weill's life seemed forgotten, the years when he and Bert Brecht had articulated the brutalization of Germany with the fierceness of embittered yearning. There had been a record of it all in the original recordings, proper Brechtian tools to estrange the listener from "empathy" and permit reflection, but they were forfeited to the oppressors.

Probably Lenya's most gallant song was "Surabaya Johnny," the aching reproach of a girl plundered by a good-for-nothing Burma sailor: "Surabaya Johnny, why are you so cruel? Surabaya Johnny, my God, and I love you so." Not only did Lenya no longer have the record of her voice; she had lost the memory of ever joining Theo Mackeben and his jazz orchestra to engrave it. "If you have to leave your country overnight, you're not going to take some records with you if the Nazis are on your heels. I knew nothing about it."

Lotte Lenja belonged to the Twenties with the far-away swing of Mackeben's band, but in early 1951 Lotte Lenya-Weill was half-caroling, half-croaking old omens in *Dreigroschenoper* at Town Hall. "I don't remember even being alive at that time. I did it because I had to do it, so this was the beginning." The next year Leonard Bernstein introduced *The Threepenny Opera*, Marc Blitzstein's English adaptation of Brecht. Finally Lenya launched the same on a six-year Off Broadway run because she deemed it a "masterpiece," necessarily softening the German but loyal both to Brecht and to Weill's trenchant scoring. For others Blitzstein's colloquialisms dampened Brecht's poetry; and the production, apart from a rich-throated,

bluesy Mrs. Peachum, was a little *too* beggarly of Brechtian craft, failing the easy fraud of the original style. However, Lenya's first purpose was soon achieved in the eighteen hit records of "Mack the Knife," a bleak, compulsive ballad memorializing infamous crimes in the vein of old street-fair singers.

With an audience widened by Louis Armstrong, Tito Puente and Constance Bennett, the next problem was to consolidate the style and point of Brecht-Weill, to restore nasality and expose Mackie Messer, the swaggering bully and ravisher whose shark colors became a uniform. Encouraged by Goddard Lieberson of Columbia Records and by her second husband, the editor George Davis, Lenya began her series of new recordings: the Brecht-Weill document of lawless Berlin in its plunge through grime, cosmetics and the dregs of glasses to its fate.

In certain respects the new enterprise was blessedly remote from the original *Threepenny* recordings, where Carola Neher had appropriated Peachum's "Useless Song" and Lenya herself sang Jenny, Lucy, Frau Peachum and the Streetsinger. In those days, "except for Ponto and Geron, the original stars were too big, they didn't think so much of *Threepenny* and didn't show up to make the records." Now, however, Lenya exercised a firm supervisory hand. She located a conductor with eighteenth century affinities like Kurt Weill's; she summoned Willy Trenk-Trebitsch of the old crew for an unctuous, implacable Peachum and the Munich cabaret star Trude Hesterberg, of the disconcertingly rock-bottom voice, for a shrewd, bawdy Frau Peachum. On the other hand, the portly Hesterberg was not invited to re-create her 1931 Begbick in *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahogany*. "I wanted to get away from the half-spoken cabaret style. Kurt Weill wrote *Mahogany* with sustaining melodies he wanted to have *sung*." Lenya secured artists of the Hamburg Staatsoper to sing them, including a famous Florestan for Brecht's parody of the liberated Florestan, Jimmy Mahoney "aus Alaska."

Although she made restitution of all songs to their rightful owners, Lenya's chief donation to the project was her own art, especially in *Mahogany*—Brecht's nightmare in which the Florida Goldküste decomposes in a ravaging capitalist typhoon amid the honky-tonk stridencies and rah-rah songs of

"anti-opera" (which Kurt Weill keeps traducing into baroque magnificence). Here again was the prostitute Jenny's artlessly alluring introduction of herself, "Jenny Smith aus Havanna," and the sublime doubt and reproach in her question at her worth, "Dreissig Dollar?" Lenya's original "Havanna Lied" had been one of her fondest tracings of a vocal line, but here was the same tender pliancy and solemn didacticism, the same limpid diction and almost the same honeyed tone, a miracle of incongruity in sum. Here in the "Berlin Theatre Songs" was a sturdy belting-out of the Sailor Tango from *Happy End*, along with the sassy saloon nostalgia of "alter Bilbao Mond" in the "Bilbao Song." Above all, here was the new "Surabaya Johnny" with its recriminations, its loss of control, its final erotic loftiness.

Undoubtedly the years had defrauded Lenya the singer of a point here and there. She no longer commanded quite the silveriness of the old "Alabama Song," quite the glistening soprano in the mysterious refrains of "Pirate Jenny." Gone was the numbing impact of Jenny's original guilelessness where even the martially accented "Und es werden kommen hundert gen Mittag an Land" was virginal in tone. A more conscious violence replaced it. But as compensation "you put in all the wisdom you have accumulated as a human being. It's a maturer Jenny or 'Surabaya Johnny' than in 1930, although the emotion, the meaning are unchangeable."

Equally unchangeable are the amusing moments where she merely brandishes her voice at the notes, the rhythmic precision, the Brechtian pungency. Yet the whole remains elusive. Lenya is enchanted by analogies to Fritzi Massary, royalest of Berlin operetta stars; but for all her exemplary diction, she happily lacks Massary's archness. And there is none of the drowsy narcissism of Dietrich's Lola-Lola either. The reason Lenya remains indefinable, says Goddard Lieberson, is "that she has an individuality that grows out of her own giving of herself to Brecht and Weill. Her individuality comes out of them, like a person assuming his full potential by falling in love with someone else."

From 1955, making the records in Berlin and Hamburg, Lenya conferred on Brecht-Weill productions throughout Germany. Sometimes she was gratified, as by German response to

Weill's "Schubertian" *Down in the Valley*. Although "Broadway has a smelly taste in Europe," *Street Scene* remained in the Düsseldorf repertory three seasons, with Caspar Neher sets. But the 1957 West Berlin revival of *Die Burgschaft*, Weill's 1932 *vale* to Trust in a police state, was a jolting travesty by the librettist Neher and the original producer Carl Ebert. To spare Berliners' feelings, blithe scarlet uniforms transported the original fascist roughs to never-never land, and because of East Berlin, potent Brechtian symbolism of economic inequalities was scrapped. The nihilistic ending, disputed by Weill's music, was sentimentalized with quantities of the score cut. Lenya also had to contend with a Darmstadt *Mahagonny* staged in "Mexican Hayride" style. "If you come just for the dress rehearsal and the opening is the next day, all you can do is hope you can keep your mouth shut. Whenever they let me sit in, I tell them what I know about it, but whether they take it or not, that's another thing." In Frankfurt and elsewhere they rejoiced to take Lenya herself in concerts and *The Seven Deadly Sins*.

Lenya's real headache was the American theatre. "Is there ever any revival in this country? That doesn't exist. The whole theatre is not geared for revival or repertory. So whenever they do revive anything on Broadway, it's rarely successful. The one exception was *Pal Joey*. They're not trained for seeing a thing twice or three times, different casts and conceptions. In Europe they're subsidized so they have their companies. The Berlin Ensemble is solid. It is sad."

Nevertheless, the late Fifties witnessed City Center revivals of Weill operas and Lenya singing to 9500 at Lewisohn Stadium. Antony Tudor's ferociously sardonic ballet *Judgment of Paris*, with the *Threepenny* music, had been resurrected. There was also the indicative American vogue of Carl Orff, the racy primitivist who helped himself to Brecht-Weill although burying the moon over Soho in a Grimm forest. The culmination was the New York premiere of *The Seven Deadly Sins* in 1958. Mirthless in a patchy sweater, short skirt and high heels, belligerent with revolver, Lenya was the "practical" Anna who convinces her instinctual sister that to dance modestly is Pride, to eat instead of starving for the strip-tease is Gluttony,

and to love a poor pimp when she has a generous protector is Lust. Under the original choreographer George Balanchine, Lenya lacked only the sultry vampirism of her 1933 *Anna*, which Brecht had cloaked with Tillie Losch to make sleek, exotic twin lilies on a single stem. Weill's score humidified Louisiana with a taut, sickly melodiousness and percussive humdrum, ceasing to ironize in the final march. And Brecht's stinging wit abided in W. H. Auden's translation, "as close as you can get to Brecht in English" in Lenya's judgment.

On opposite walls of Lenya's sunny East Side apartment are a silhouette of her 1928 bustled Jenny and a record jacket of the Toulouse-Lautrec Jenny. The small woman seated at the telephone table between them is neither. "Lenya" is a stage name, and this is Karoline Weill-Davis, an astute but amiable businesswoman with the latest telegrams about Prague and Lucerne. *Mahagonny*s grasped in her long fingers. Her hair is red, but as Milton Caniff has told her, it somehow tolerates red sweaters, and she wears them, often turtle-neck. With her bangs and the large, musing eyes in a slender, eager face, she looks to be a Carson McCullers waif grown up. Her enthusiasm is infectious as she plucks from a shelf of Balzac a new photo of Brecht's widow Helene Weigel, inscribed in quaint Brechtian English "from the oldest sexbomb." Her gestures are succinct, her voice patient and a touch husky as she deliberates new projects.

Lenya's accountability to Brecht and Weill forced her to withdraw from "the shambles" Edinburgh made of *The Seven Deadly Sins*, although she permitted the work to be heard. But she is optimistic about Hamburg's forthcoming *Mahagonny*, which was delayed by uneasiness over Brecht's side of the Berlin wall. A reliable performer of Berg's Lulu is to be Jenny, but maybe the Negro soprano Mattiwilda Dobbs would be even better. "Jenny sings 'Ich bin aus Havanna, meine Mutter war eine Weisse'—so that shows her father was a Negro. So that would be my choice, a very Brechtish and Weillish idea." Although it is the poorest selling of Lenya's albums, *Mahagonny* may also descend upon Lincoln Center, if Kurt Weill's orchestral battery can be managed. Meanwhile, there is a recording of the energetic *Happy End*, with its Johnny songs

and more Mandalay, still to be issued here, and Lenya has recently recorded the *Brecht on Brecht* material. Hanns Eisler's mournful "Song of a German Mother" (who gave her son the brown shirt that became a winding sheet) was brought to her attention by Eric Bentley after Bentley's sure vocalizing of Brecht on the radio impelled her to write a fan letter. Queerly, the two foremost Brechtians in the United States have never met although Lenya is reported contemplating Bentley's new *Threepenny* translation for the bilingual edition of Brecht.

Lenya is devoted to Brecht but not especially devout, an imperfect Brechtian as it were. For one thing, the theories of epic theatre, of socialist actors narrating or reporting or demonstrating in an estrangement from the audience and the role, have never been her portion. Perhaps she encouraged audiences to reason rather than to identify, but "whatever I did, it seemed to be right without his theory. I went to Brecht's house, I worked with him as you work with a director. He sang a little bit, phrases, snatches. Try it this way, try it that way. And don't forget, there was always Kurt Weill at the piano." Directing *Threepenny* and *Mahagonny* in 1928 and 1931, Brecht "never once talked to me about *Verfremdung* and all those things. Either it was right or wrong and no more and no theory ever."

That it was right in retrospect is proven by the notes on the *Threepenny* "Process" and *Mahagonny* which Brecht published immediately afterward. "There is a kind of speaking-against-the-music which can have strong effects," he wrote, "the result of a stubborn, incorruptible sobriety which is independent of music and rhythm" and which intensifies the dialectic already present in text and music. Lenya allows that Jenny is aware of her outburst in "Pirate Jenny," that it is not overflowing emotional but calculated, yet "I can't describe it, I can only *do* it."

The fact is, however, she could do it if "somebody would take me right in the middle, say, and ask me a question. I would stop and answer the question and go right on because I don't need any mood to create. I don't have to get into a trance to do what I'm doing." The last word on what she is doing is probably Brecht's after all. Shortly before his death she visited him and told him about her proposed

record of Berlin theatre songs. "Brecht, I'd like to make this record, but we have to discuss it because in the meantime you have that theory about epic theatre and all that." The answer was, "Lenya, whatever you do, it's epic enough for me."

As for Jenny's place in the Brechtian menagerie (to use Eric Bentley's term), she is a figure of love in her pining tango with Macheath, but she betrays. The keynote of "Pirate Jenny" is revenge: "the eternal underdog, she dreams of the day when she can pay it back, all those rats." And Lenya does not suffer merrily talk of parodistic effects in this song, its reference to kitchen maid's fiction on the one hand or "Senta's Ballad" on the other. "It is as earnest and sincere as can be." Yet if "Pirate Jenny" seems helpful, Lenya reminds us that it was originally Polly Peachum's song recited as entertainment at the stable wedding, and only later switched by Brecht to Jenny, who has since defended the favor.

The only solution to Jenny is the other Jenny in *Mahagonny*, who will wear undergarments or not as her lover pleases. She is the same character, Lenya affirms. In the anarchy of the pit, Jenny Smith too prefers to kick rather than be kicked and will not reclaim the woodcutter from the electric chair decreed by his whiskey debt. But as she perches on her little suitcase in the long black stockings of a frail, bangs over her forehead, straw hat tipped cockily, and elegizes her lost innocence to the Moon of Alabama, or as she joins Jimmy in the fragile, dreamy duet of the cranes, she defies us to doubt her values. And she is herself many times more valuable than her price in the golden city of nets. In the paradox of Brecht's make-believe, the moon is a paper disk, hot floodlight over the stage because "we are workers, friends, not wizards." Jenny is both in that she transcends the brassy clang of horror in which Brecht's helpless workers are indistinguishable in license from their exploiters, thus becoming a humane reference point where one is fervently desired.

In general, Lenya is inclined to stress Brecht the romantic and humanitarian "liberal," like Clifford Odets in this country. "Brecht was very romantic, which is almost sacrilegious to say now because they know him only from his cynical side, which is very misleading." Random and domestic in her

apartment, Lenya becomes theatrical only now, palm raised to explain Brecht's thinking. "That's the only thing, you can *hope*. This is what Brecht says a thousand times. He hopes for a better future, but you who are born where man to man is helper at last, think of us in the past with some understanding, that we who wished to plant the seed of kindness could not ourselves be kind. You who are born with the advantage that you don't have to go through a war of classes and to change your country more often than shoes—he *says* it. This is Brecht, and it is not a Communist talking. It is a great humanist talking. This is what I can tell over and over again."

It is what she is afforded a prime opportunity to tell in Jenny's "Solomon Song," a docile litany of great souls whose virtues shine like naughty deeds in a society which makes them remarkable. But there is always the peril of confusing Brecht with wise old Solomon. Lenya has been known to deny there was anything Marxist in her 1931 film of *Dreigroschenoper*, where the pretty and well-trained Polly Peachum becomes a banker with portfolio and the beggars march like the proletariat in Eisenstein. In the early Fifties, when she piloted a recording of the Brecht-Weill *Der Jasager*—a utilitarian "school opera" teaching Communist sacrifice to participants and audience—Brecht's politics were a curious mystery in the sleeve notes. And Lenya's choice of Brecht poems for her recorded anthology of German verse omits any of his more searing visions.

Inevitably Lenya's expectations of America were colored by the perverse Brechtian romance with this country. However, though "coming home" to skylines out of von Sternberg movies, she and Kurt Weill did not find the Here-You-May-Do-Anything Inn at New City, New York. For that matter, they did not find Negroes in Hoboken, as *Lied von Hoboken*, a mis-translated Berlin play in which Lenya was a mulatto, had assured them they would. "You're in the wrong department. Try Harlem."

Brecht had been in the wrong department, too, but Lenya recalls that not everyone thought so. When Lenya did *Mahagonny* in Vienna in 1932, one of her fans was Ernest Krenek, composer of the world-gladdening if rather naïve and slight jazz opera about a Negro band leader and white women, *Jon-*

ny spielt auf, which eventually suffocated at the Metropolitan. Krenek had introduced locomotives to opera but his verdict on *Mahagonny* was: "I'm sorry, Lenya, I loved you but I hate that work. It's raw and vicious." By 1937, however, visiting the Weills, Krenek had changed his mind. "After living in this country for two years, now I understand *Mahagonny*." Lenya considers this movingly honest, but still, she insists, "only the locality of America is taken. *Mahagonny* is a play about Germany, about capitalism, about anywhere." Brecht himself was grateful to America during his time here and "had a very healthy feeling," but saw no future because he could never learn to write the language.

Kurt Weill, on the other hand, visiting radio studios, *Porgy and Bess* and Harlem, learned the musical language so nicely that Todd Duncan would find his role in *Lost in the Stars* more challenging than Porgy. The question is whether Weill didn't also waive some of his old refractoriness. In the German years he had impeached the puffy apparatus of late Romanticism because it induced sleep instead of recognitions. Resolved to communicate intelligibly in vital theater, to be the "poor man's Verdi," he likewise abandoned atonality and declined the frigid academicism of his friend Hindemith. Essentially conservative but aware of experiments by Stravinsky and Milhaud, he effected a kind of counter-reformation in German romanticism during the Brecht period, fusing Mahlerian harmonies, classicist ideals and ragtime into a highly accessible theatre idiom. With its flat melodies and jaded syncopations, so-called "vulgar" music was simple and incisive, in Brecht's mind ideal for expressing social attitudes as against useless individual psychology. (As for why music at all: it is a kind of presentable garb for Brecht's derelicts although the whole point remains, for Brecht as for Peachum, that they are pretty threadbare.)

Yet in the U. S. the revolutionary Weill was doing, not the importunate Marc Blitzstein subjects or even a *Guys and Dolls* but *One Touch of Venus*. And how did Brecht's old comrade in the brutal recoil of the "Kanonensong" join up with Maxwell Anderson, who thought his heroes must "take arms against what enemies assail them and come out of the battle with their morale intact," of all things? Anderson

A montage of Lenya, Peter Lorre and Carl Balhaus in Frank Wedekind's *The Awakening of Spring* (Berlin, 1930). Lorre and Fritz Kortner were among the great German actors enlisted by Brecht.





Lenya in Zurich, 1915. Before the Zurich Stadttheater, she had danced in a circus in Vienna.



Lenya in dancing costume in Zurich, 1916. In the corps de ballet she romped as a clown or in a cook's hat.



The whore Jenny was somewhat conventionalized in G. W. Pabst's film *Die Dreigroschenoper*, but Lenya's performance was indomitably Brechtian.



Sammlung Niessen

As Jenny Smith and Jimmy Mahoney, Lenya and Harald Paulsen saw evil everywhere in *Mahagonny* (Berlin, 1931).



Certy Simon

In 1931 Lenya returned from Odessa appreciably Russified.



Atelier Jacobi

Lenya and Hermann Speelmanns in the Berlin Volksbühne production *Lied von Hoboken*, 1932. The translator of this American play meant to sing about Harlem.



Condé Nast

In 1933 Lenya created the mercenary Anna II in *The Seven Deadly Sins* at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris. Her sirenishness grimly underlined the irony of the character.



Lenya and her mother on the latter's first visit to the United States, 1947.



Lenya and Bessie Breuer at the Weills' Rockland County home in 1947. Purchased in 1941, Brook House is now a "luxury" but a source of much of Lenya's strength.



Lenya on her return to Berlin after the War, 1955. Gloomy at first, she was soon heartened by the affection for her scratchy old records, the anticipation of her new ones.



Louis Armstrong joined Lenya in recording the "Ballad of Mack the Knife."



Fehl

A hard Anna II and a despoiled Anna I (Allegra Kent) in the 1958 New York City Ballet production of *The Seven Deadly Sins*, choreographed by George Balanchine.



Lenya as the scavenging Contessa in *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, 1962. Next could be the intrepid rascality and tangy songs of the vivandière Mother Courage.

probed the psychology of exceptional protagonists representing the forces of good; were his "Ballad of Magna Carta," the fatuous *Knickerbocker Holiday* and the racial drama *Lost in the Stars*, incorrigibly healthy-minded, material for the satirist Weill? Didn't Weill's magisterial African choruses—even the anguished "Cry the Beloved Country"—tend to mawkishness where the old fox trots were electrifying in their banality? Was Weill an original genius only when the text was so invincible as to require him to say something for himself?

"People say Kurt Weill got soft in this country; he succumbed to Broadway. But I think that an opera like *Street Scene* could very well have been written by Brecht. It attacks the poverty of those people in the brownstone tenement. Remember, when Brecht went back he still had some things to attack as before, but here in this country there was less to attack." For Lenya, Weill's story is the clear and natural development of a "romantic, a great romanticist" committed above all to his music. Lenya's first allegiance is to that music, American as well as German—but not without paradox so far as her own career is concerned.

Exiling all but the most selfless sense pleasure from the tidings in their ballad opera, *Lehrstück* and *Zeitoper*, Brecht and Weill set a premium on the untrained voices of singing actors. The voice of Lenya, the actress Weill had married in 1926, was as "popular" and merely approximate as any other, not apt to entertain so imperiously as Maria Jeritza's. It was sufficiently wrong to be reasonably right from a boxing ring beneath ghoulish Caspar Neher projections at the 1927 Baden-Baden "little" *Mahagonny*. The sound was a plaintive moan in Brecht's Tin Pan Alley "Is here no telephone?," yet it was chastely melodic for the rest of the "Benares-Song," heightening the ironic wistfulness for another sin city. The words were clear even as Jenny champed an apple, and this new kind of singer was eligible for whistling back, in Brecht's uproarious design, at a yowling apoplectic audience. In all, Lenya belonged where music, as Brecht felt, was in counterpoint to the text, taking issue with it, songs providing opportunity for meditating rather than an intensity of purgation. Music and speech were on separate levels; the former could be no more voluptuous than the latter,

and with Lenya it wasn't.

But by the sixth collaboration of Brecht and Weill, the big *Mahagonny* of 1930, Kurt Weill's musicianship was straining at the leash, unsettling Brecht with continuous music, an orchestra of forty-strong (cheek-by-jowl with accordion and zither were the dreaded violins), fugue developments and drum-punctuated ensembles of Verdian power. Had there been any pretense of rationality it would have been handily "washed away," from Brecht's point of view, by the music. There *was* that pretense in *Die Burgschaft*, Weill's 1932 grand opera in which the Commissars of the New Order are beckoned by the totalitarianism of force and money within everyman. Humanizing Casper Neher's nearly unbearable book, Weill's music was lyrically elaborate in arias, giant orchestral ritornellos and enormous choruses. Although the Nazis were dismayed, Brecht was only less so, finding in the Handelian polyphony the mandragora of "culinary theatre" lulling the mind and the will. Brecht pronounced it "bourgeois." And there was no role for Lenya.

Kurt Weill was to assert his ideal at the time of the neo-Puccinian "dramatic musical" *Street Scene*. Reserving his jazz rhythms mainly for children among garbage pails, he sought an illusionary "blending of drama and music in which the singing continues naturally where the speaking stops." This is the exact reverse of Brecht's prescription, "but who makes Brecht the great expert on music, I want to know?" Lenya asks. "Kurt Weill was a full-blooded musician and not just what Brecht, I must say, reduced his composers to—to a level where the music serves his needs as a dramatist and no more. I am convinced that opera is an art in itself and will exist as long as Mr. Brecht's theories."

Except that circumstance wouldn't have it so, Weill would have created operas in Germany, a few musical plays in between, and no songs for the labor movement. This view of Lenya is admissible since Weill ended by fashioning Broadway opera, sophisticating the musical with adroit orchestration, a relatively superior gift of melody and a measure of the old concern with mores—paving the rather luxurious way to Bernstein's *West Side*. "I think surely Leonard Bernstein know every note of Kurt Weill, and he is the closest to Kurt Weill, taking up

where he left off at his death." Of course, Bernstein's Manhattan is not only polyrhythmic but shark-infested where the onetime Moritat-singer was looking to *Green Mansions*, *Gone With the Wind* and Herman Wouk for subjects. But Weill's *Huckleberry Finn* with Maxwell Anderson might have been a major folk opera by a man whose assimilation of American history, culture and idiom was gracefully complete. As Weill told Lenya in the hospital: "Darling, I will float it in beautiful music." And *Moby Dick*, according to Weill's notes, might have followed.

The fact remains that Lenya's career as exponent of her husband's music halted with the leave-taking of Brecht and Weill. To be sure, since her comeback she has recorded Weill's American theatre songs with glamorous, supple mastery. The warmth and inflection of her "Speak Low" (the song at which Dietrich balked when proffered *One Touch of Venus*), the suave, expansive "September Song," the caressingly spun "It Never Was You"—all reveal tonal bloom, poised phrasing and the utmost imagination in dynamics. She is buoyant in the tripping "Green-Up Time" and insistent in the outcry of the torch song "Trouble Man." Best of all, she transforms herself as lustily as did the svelte Gertrude Lawrence for the swinging "Saga of Jenny," third of Kurt Weill's "four Jennys in one generation." ("Look," says Lenya, "for me Gertie Lawrence was tops in *Lady in the Dark*, so you can't tell me I'm doing just as well. Oh God, I loved her.")

Still, Lenya appeared in only one of the Broadway musicals, *The Firebrand of Florence* in 1945, and this was Weill's one flop. Lenya as a roguish Duchess on the make was up to the really opulent music; there was twinkling insinuation in her "Sing Me Not a Ballad" with an almost silken beauty in the refrain. But when her co-star Walter Slezak withdrew at the last minute, she was left on a limb: "My style would never ever jell with Melville Cooper's." And John Murray Anderson's overproduction, the heavy Florentine costumes, "moved like goo." Thereupon, although she might have known better than to make up her mind, Lenya decided to sing no more.

Through most of the Forties she embraced the new role of audience. Her husband's songs infallibly came to his

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Lotte Lenya

[continued from page 18]

inner ear "in Lenya's voice," but Lenya sat in the house while they sounded in the trained voices of the "fabulous" Mary Martin or even the celestial Polyna Stoska. "Kurt Weill trusted my judgment very much when it came, for instance, to the first orchestra rehearsal. He wanted me there because with my untrained ear, which he called such a highly musical ear, I was already audience. And he never allowed me to learn to read music. He said no, it would spoil you. Leave it alone." Lenya was still dead center in the theatre with Weill and his lyricists Ira Gershwin, Ogden Nash and Alan Jay Lerner, with Anderson, Moss Hart, Elmer Rice, directors Elia Kazan and Rouben Mamoulian, conductors Maurice Devine and Maurice Abravanel. But her own occupation was ironing shirts on South Mountain Road in Rockland County, in the home elegant as a Swiss chalet, replete with a decoy duck. She collaborated with Alfred Lunt's valet in a Victory garden of colossal watermelons and belonged to the woods and tranquil brook and Kurt Weill's sheepdogs with the shaggy bangs.

She would sing again, but mainly as custodian of the Brecht-Weill tradition. Her habit of discriminating between herself and "real singers" is implanted from a time when she carried the trains of *Sängerkrieg* contestants into the Hall of Song. The truth is "I don't like to sing. I like to act." Currently her feline, pictorial Contessa in the film *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* has fastened on the public consciousness like the movie work of Magnani and Paxinou, though in a radically different tradition. With it Lenya has resumed a career no prima donna would fathom.

If self-possession in the midst of tensions is a Lenya trait, it can be traced to her days on the tight-rope. Born in a Vienna tenement surrounded by rubber factories, she could look down from the kitchen window to a small permanent circus in the field below—bleachers, stage, three-man orchestra and no tent. When the summers were not too rainy, neighborhood urchins were recruited to fill in the program. Lenya was taught to walk on a small wire between poles, moving just above the ground but nobly encumbered with an umbrella between tiny fists. "A little kid with an umbrella—that's what they

mean when they say 'she started in a circus'!"

From this she proceeded to ballet, studying in Zurich where she lived with an aunt during the War, also acting boy's parts in fervent operettas like *Polish Blood* and singing wherever necessary in her natural voice. Excelling as a Wagnerian extra, she stood for hours in *Parsifal* but also danced in the Venusburg bacchanale. In *Rheingold* she was a dwarf carrying the Rheingold on her back. Although hers was short of being a vocal contribution, her intimacy with Wagner would be a lasting delight to Kurt Weill. "I sang whole stretches of the bass because I happened to stand behind the chorus who sang bass. 'My God, what are you singing now?' Kurt Weill would ask. Well, I learned it this way."

Tending more and more to serious acting in Zurich, Lenya moved to Berlin in 1923, where the recompense during inflation was mainly practice—as Juliet, Rosalind and Maria with an "idealistic" company which toured the suburbs. Recalling that time Lenya, with typical diffidence and perspective, savors the memory of other actors. Paramount among them was Bergner doing, for instance, Shaw's *St. Joan* for Max Reinhardt and his dramatize, one Bertolt Brecht. It is probable that Lenya shared some of Bergner's slim, juvenile unworldliness in Shakespeare, the boyishness which recaptured the Elizabethan stage. (Oddly in view of her own orientation, Lenya mentions first among German actors the inveterately histrionic Eugen Klöpfer and Lucie Höflich.)

Then, spending a country summer with the Georg Kaisers, Lenya agreed one day to row across the lake to fetch a week-end guest. The guest was Kurt Weill, ex-conductor in the provinces, student of the arch-nationalist Humperdinck and the austere Busoni, quiet rebel. He and Kaiser set to work on a one-act opera about traveling actors with a title suggesting Lenya's own future role, *Der Protagonist*. Shortly after it was finished, Lenya and Weill were married. Much later Weill mustered some of his noblest music for another Kaiser text, *The Silver Lake*, a winter's tale from which Lenya was to sing the proclamatory telling of Hitler, "Cäsars Tod." In the meantime, however, Weill had been drawn to Brecht's urgent poems and productions and drew his wife with him.

Lenya auditioned the new "Alabama Song" for Brecht and his remark—"Not quite so Egyptian"—was the keynote for the relaxed style she was to evolve as an actress. She found this relaxation prevailed only on stage. However unshaven, lank and idle looking with his leather cap and cigar, Brecht was ensnared in endless propositions of his disciples, and Weill lost time with forlorn pupils in his dingy apartment. Yet somehow the confederacy succeeded in being a very "interwoven" one with exchange of ideas from the start, Weill scrupulously attentive to Brecht although not always mindful of his guitar and Brecht long-suffering with the actors. Conceivably Lenya's presence in the sanctuary was relaxing; with her piquant face and chic bangs she was the only member of the Brecht retinue safely untempted to resemble Brecht. And she was well aware of the sight and sound of "working women in the backyards of tenements on Sunday afternoons," Brecht's ideal according to Hanns Eisler.

The premiere of *Dreigroschenoper* was as precarious as the tight-rope. Producer Ernst Aufricht was afraid of Kurt Weill, an "avant-garde" composer, and contemplated using the original *Beggar's Opera* airs until Lenya's singing of the Tango bedeviled him into conviction. Brecht, for his part, was undone by Aufricht's deadline and fled with Helene Weigel and the Weills to the Riviera to complete the play. During rehearsals the idea of it all had to be pounded into Harald Paulsen, the handsome tenor doing Mackie Messer, and, besides, Paulsen wanted an entrance aria. The cabaret *chanteuse* Rosa Valetti, on the other hand, herself a model for Brecht, pulled up short at Mrs. Peachum's idea that by nightfall men are "lying again on top" and refused to sing her "filthy" song. (Says Lenya: "Brecht is never vulgar, and the advice he gives two people in the 'Procurer's Ballade,' for example, is almost, for me, a *Lehrstück*. He just tells you what to do when a woman is pregnant and not to disturb that pregnancy. If you have a dirty mind, you can say it's dirty. For me it's pure.")

Although she lost her "Solomon Song" in the bawling mayhem of the last rehearsal, Lenya was saluted for the Danubian lilt in her voice, and Lenya the actress entered permanently the lore of Berlin. Dancing Macheath into the arms of the police, she delivered a saucy wave of farewell which became

a symbol in the great era of betrayal. Gesture as Brechtian *Gestus*, it persisted on the streets of Germany long after Lenya's records were labeled "degenerate" and dissolved in acid. *Gestus* or embodied attitude, again, was the adoption of Lenya's songs as codes in concentration camps.

Dreigroschenoper ran indefinitely in Berlin, besides spreading everywhere else, but Lenya surrendered Jenny for other roles, some of remote pertinence to Brecht. Defiant in brimmed hat and trench coat, dragging a cigarette, she was the free-living Ilse in Wedekind's sex calamity *The Awakening of Spring*, with Peter Lorre. Max Reinhardt sent his pupils to see this Volksbühne production of 1930, and Lenya also joined Lorre in *Pioneer in Ingolstadt*. A sovereign experience was *Danton's Death* where, although sensuality palled, sullied mistresses and wives so unhinged as to doubt the revolution knew, with Danton at the guillotine, that "you cannot keep our heads from kissing at the bottom of the basket." At the Staatstheater Lenya had also acted Sophocles, Moliere and Schiller.

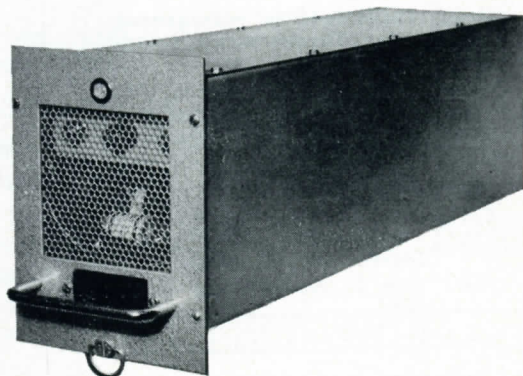
Returning to *Dreigroschenoper* she played Lucy instead of Jenny because of Brecht's boyishly informal and impartial relation with Macheath's ladies. But Lenya was reappointed to Jenny in the celebrated Pabst film with Carola Neher, Ernst Busch and Theo Mackeben conducting. The cameraman Fritz Arno Wagner apparently imagined himself back with Murnau's eldritch *Nosferatu*, for his traveling shots kept the brothel uncannily gliding, at it were, like Dracula's coach and spectral ship. But in the midst of over-enriched or melting realities, Lenya restored some of Brecht's mordancy with her drawn face, her slumping posture and neck choked in long black ribbon. Pabst's film was sober at times, but not the quintessential Pabst, still less the quintessential Brecht as Brecht apprized the public in a lawsuit and sixty pages of derisive, righteous commentary. But despite a mellowing in the part itself, Lenya demarcated the demoralizing image of Jenny.

It is the Brechtian fraternity of actors which Lenya remembers best. Peter Lorre played with Weigel in the 1931 *Mann ist Mann*, Brecht's first consciously "epic" production (with music by Weill, now lost). Rational and explanatory in the Brechtian method, he was unforgettable, "such

an extraordinary actor." For Lenya his trip to Hollywood, thence to China or wherever as Mr. Moto, was peculiarly unfortunate. Even more unfortunate was the slightly Carola Neher, whose frail, ingenuous voice introduced "Surabaya Johnny" in the Brecht-Weill *Happy End*, where she was Lilian Holiday, the girlish salvationist turned moll to subvert gangsters, with Lorre, Weigel and Oscar Homolka. The irony there was intransigent enough, the Salvation Army finally affiliating with the gang in respectable commercialism. Reality was worse when the fetching woman for whom Brecht wrote Polly Peachum and St. Joan of a Chicago insurgent, and to whom he dedicated poems, emigrated to Soviet Russia and disappeared in Stalin's liquidations.

On the other hand, the massive Therese Giehse, alumna of the Munich *Dreigroschenoper*, was to become the first Mutter Courage with Brecht in Zurich.

And there was Weigel, of course, whose crippled Madam in *Threepenny*, legless on a wheeled platform, was critically overcome by appendicitis. She would be Lenya's counterpart as the keen superintendent of the Berliner Ensemble, the obedient, lucid, weather-beaten actress and dry-voiced singer of the later Brecht. Today Lenya and Weigel are on "the best of terms," although these are of the nature of peace terms since their firing of peremptory telegrams over a Berlin *Threepenny* production (and a certain amount of Lucy-Polly discord over rights in general).



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Dearest friend of Lenya in the group is Caspar Neher, Brecht's versatile stage designer. "Much too little is said about Neher. There is one of the creators of Brecht's whole style visually on the stage. He created whatever you see there." Neher remained in Germany during Hitler "because you cannot transplant a man like Neher into a new environment. He is too earth-bound. You cannot expect that a whole nation just emigrates—and I cannot share this everlasting hatred."

The climax of Lenya's career in Germany was of course the big operatic *Mahagonny*, but it was not without dilemmas. It was true that she was getting accustomed to musicians by this time, and Otto Klemperer, for example, "just as aggressive as Brecht and Weill, always slightly making fun of those long-haired composers at the festivals," was a friend of the original Singspiel *Mahagonny*. "In we came with that boxing ring, and Klemperer got it. He recognized the fresh air from that direction," later conducting the Brecht-Weill radio cantata *Lindberghflug* and commissioning a suite of "Dreigroschenmusik." It was one thing to know Dr. Klemperer, however, and another to sing under a maestro of his Olympian character. Theo Mackeben, musical director of *Threepenny*, was a vigorous "accompanist," but *Mahagonny* was conducted by two of Germany's ranking musicians.

Lenya didn't have to worry about Gustav Brecher, the Generalmusikdirektor in Leipzig who gave the work its tumultuous premiere amid Nazi Brown Shirts and eventually took his life fleeing the Nazis. She was in the audience on that occasion, when the melee reached even the stage and was checked by the police so that the opera was played in Leipzig with lights on and canceled elsewhere. However, she was cast for Jenny in the Berlin premiere at the Kurfürstendamm Theater, and the maestro was the exacting Alexander von Zemlinsky.

No grinder of street-organs, the urbane Zemlinsky was brother-in-law of Schoenberg, teacher of Erich Korngold, seasoned conductor in Vienna and Prague and composer of uncompromising modernist operas (one a setting of Klabund's *Kreidekreis*, which also bred Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*). Nevertheless, after her *Threepenny* success, Lenya was a bit cavalier. Joining Zemlinsky in the rehearsal room, she modulated her voice



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from soft to softer. "I can never do much in rehearsal, you know, especially with those partly opera singers. And working in the room there, Zemlinsky always said, 'Well, sing out, when do you sing out in rehearsal?' I said never. 'Well, I have to hear you.' I said, I can't do anything in rehearsal. Let me get on stage and I'll show you what I do. And then the first rehearsal on stage, when Paulsen and all those trained opera singers fluffed, I went straight through the score without the slightest mistake. And he looked at me and said, 'Okay, now I know what you are doing.' And from then on he left me in peace. A guy like Zemlinsky: he 'admired' probably Mahler, but he *understood* Kurt Weill"—a circumstance with which Lenya had much to do.

Escaping over the border on the day of the Reichstag fire, a few hours before their scheduled arrest, Lenya and Weill found refuge in Monte Carlo, where Lenya gambled their savings, and then in Paris and London. In both cities Weill composed new musical shows, and Lenya sang concert versions of the old ones. Her only new role was the relentless Anna II in *Seven Deadly Sins*, which she created for Les Ballets in Paris. Then in 1935, having bestowed Korngold on Hollywood, Max Reinhardt summoned Weill to New York. His task was to score Franz Werfel's rather occult pageant of Old Testament faith and valor, *The Eternal Road*. Lenya found herself back in the circus, this time the Reinhardt big-top.

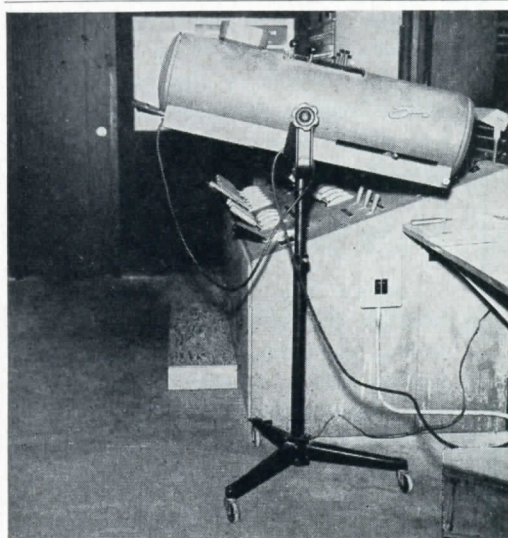
Reinhardt's intention of "holding high the banners of idealism and humanism" was abetted by Norman Bel Geddes, who supplied two forty-foot columns for the Temple of Solomon and thirty-two foot statues in Joseph's palace. The Manhattan Opera House was redone with twenty-six miles of wiring and enormous ramps for a mountain road rising four stories in supplication to Jehovah. Among 1772 costumes, one went to Lenya as Miriam, who also sported a stylish Cleopatra coiffure, and Sam Jaffe was in the cast of 245. But aside from the half-million dollars making it New York's costliest legitimate theater production, this "scenic oratorio" was memorable for the flushed and exultant score by Kurt Weill, son of a cantor. Weill had diligently culled dozens of traditional Hebraic melodies. The score displayed his versatility alongside his droll antiwar play

Johnny Johnson of the same period.

In the next two decades Lenya had precisely two "straight" parts, both written for her. In Maxwell Anderson's *Candle in the Wind* (1941), a paean to faith inexorably embodied in Helen Hayes, she was a refreshingly cynical Austrian refugee. And in 1951 Anderson's *Barefoot in Athens*, which was otherwise just bare, found Lenya the scolding but womanly helpmeet of a Socrates who faintly resembled Brecht in his mission of demurring. A momentary crisis over Xantippe's accent was ironic in view of Lenya's pains with English, which she learned phonetically with Brecht, learned thoroughly in London and resolutely relearned for New York. (Her English is

now superb, with occasional unluckiness like "Leave well-to-do alone.")

"Producers don't see me as an actress because I have sung"—but in 1960 José Quintero, casting *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, saw Lenya as a talent for the select sisterhood of Tennessee Williams. "This is my dream director because he has foresight and comes so close to Brecht with his ability to show you with a gesture or with his eyes, not to strangle you." The script invoked "an old, nibbling, nuts-eating, ever-hungry procuress," but Lenya shrugged off *Hansel und Gretel* and recommended *Mrs. Warren's Profession* instead. "The Contessa had a husband who provided, but she loses everything and gets into that society



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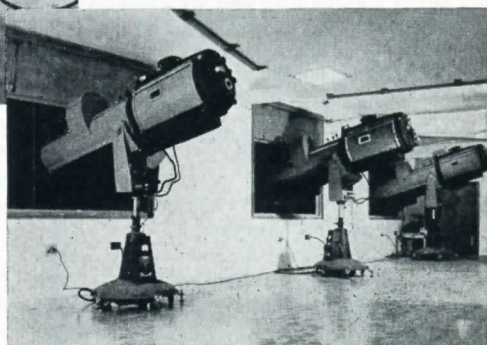
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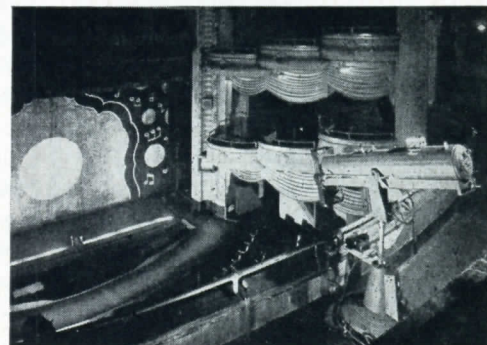
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and runs her business well. It is a kind of off-beat business, but she's rather fair, she shares fifty-fifty, which you do not always get in this world of ours. She is in a way a very decent, witty, capable woman."

Lenya may not have civilized the panderer quite this much. As the em-purpled creature minces on her unholy errands, there is the uncomfortable sensation of antennae extended. Yet the performance is Brechtian in its commandeering of properties like the cigarillos, brandy snifter and address book, in the acrimonious tugging of Warren Beatty's tie and Lenya's fondling of the cat Ludwig, who was a decided partisan of the Contessa on the set. And there was "no great psychological approach. I am Brecht-trained, and that word was not in Brecht's vocabulary. If someone would give me Camille to play tomorrow, I would have a different approach to her, of her time and what she would have thought—otherwise you couldn't possibly convey what the author meant with the part."

Lenya's life is a bountiful one whether she is acting or not. She drives, plays poker with Mitch Miller and gardens in defiance of rabbits and deer, wearing the Latin handkerchief around her neck to keep cool. Her chief resource at leisure is simply her relishing of other artists at work. There is no purveyor of Kurt Weill whom she fails to construe or prize, from the crackly-voiced Walter Huston through the "terrific" Danny Kaye to Lawrence Winters. She has no preconceptions of what can or cannot be done. A performance of the "September Song" by Jimmy Durante was the most heart-breakingly beautiful in her experience, bringing tears to her eyes.

Lenya's taste circuits Kurt Weill to the popular song, to Mozart, Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* and *Carmen*. She delights in referring to the present decade to the "fabulous Sixties," comparable to the fabulous Twenties in Berlin because of Judy Garland, Eartha Kitt, Connie Francis, Patti Page, Georgia Brown, Elvis Presley and Sinatra on the one hand, Maria Callas, Milanov, Leontyne Price, Tebaldi and George London on the other. The surcharged Callas is her favorite, "the dream singer of my time, a tremendous actress with a voice which so many people say is not a beautiful voice, which I think is such a wonderful voice. Of course, where I use five horsepower, she uses

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fifty-five, but do you think there is so much difference between her aria in *Traviata* and my 'Pirate Jenny'? She sings it with the same understanding of what she wants to express without swooping away into some hypnosis."

Among actresses Lenya singles out Barbara Bel Geddes, Julie Harris, Geraldine Page in *Sweet Bird of Youth* and Vivien Leigh, a "marvelous professional." A neglected performer is Viveca Lindfors, who acts the desolate Jewish wife in a scene from *Private Life of the Master Race* in Brecht on Brecht. Actually, Lindfors' heaving emotionalism is debatably Brechtian, but it may be appropriate to Brecht's final stylistic resourcelessness before the enormities of the Third Reich. Lenya considers her "an excellent actress and beautiful creature" tragically misused by Hollywood, where people, like Kurt Weill's orchestrations, are overblown into shapelessness.

For the future Lenya is less interested in concert tours than in work like *Brecht on Brecht*, where she is deft in gesture, purposeful in repose beneath a quizzical photo of Brecht and reposed in the spotlight. She also enjoyed recording German poetry, ranging from vehemence in "Der Bauer" through knightly irony in Schiller to an impetuous vibrancy in Rilke's "Spanische Tänzerin," where her diction imperatively snaps, clacks and stamps like the fingers, hands and heels of *gitano*. An enterprising television producer might see her as the weary, almost phantom Elizabeth of Austria in Anderson's *Masque of Kings* or in Brecht's unequivocal playlet *Señora Carrar's Rifles*, about the Spanish Civil War, an Andalusian mother's tigerish rejoinder to neutrality when her boy fishing is machine-gunned by the Nationalists. The Republicanism of the latter play, anti-facist but with Communist points, renders it unlikely, but it would be a headlong Aristotelian vehicle for a change. Most of all, there is *Mother Courage* provisioning the Thirty Years' War. Her cunning social seasonableness would be no enigma to Brecht's materialist Jenny and Anna, her radiant personal fidelities no mystery to Lotte Lenya. Lenya feels that Paul Dessau, composer of the folkish score, "succumbed" to Brecht, but "it's a marvelous part. And so thought Mr. Brecht that I would be a good Mother Courage. I worked with him on the songs just before his death—all I needed was a little advice of his to know what he meant."



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