

For your
theatre
CRAVEN
ANC

THEATRE ARTS

Extra copy
See: page 78, 79, 80
81.9

23
50 cents

LYRIC

APOLLO

RING
FOR
CATTY

BUCCANEER

BY MACENZIE

LYRIC

TROCADERO

BLACKWHITE
CARTER

LEADER

may 1956



RODERICK MACARTHUR

that

by

lotte

lenya



EVE ARNOLD

The vast success of the English adaptation of *Die Dreigroschenoper* in 1956 is one of the brightest chapters in New York's off-Broadway activity. Pictured at the foreground in the Theatre de Lys production are Scott Merrill and Lotte Lenya.

Lotte Lenya, widow of Kurt Weill, recalls the origin of the Brecht-Weill *Threepenny Opera* in the accompanying article. This photograph was made during a recent recording session for Columbia, at which she sang Berlin theatre songs by Weill.

RIGHT: Lotte Lenya cut this striking figure in 1928 at the première of *Die Dreigroschenoper* in Berlin, in the identical role of Jenny which she has been playing again in 1956. Lotte Reiniger made this silhouette on the night of the Berlin opening.

was a time!

It was Elisabeth Hauptmann, Bert Brecht's secretary and vigilant shadow in the mid-twenties, who first read of the great success in London of a revival of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*. She promptly ordered a copy of the play and, as soon as it arrived, began a rough translation whenever she had a few free moments, giving the German text to Brecht one scene at a time. Brecht was busily engaged on a play of his own, a most ambitious one which was promised to a producer; but at this early stage in his career he habitually kept a number of works-in-progress whirling around him (never throwing away so much as a scrap of paper on which he had scribbled two words). These bawds, bully boys and beggars of eighteenth-century London were creatures to delight his heart; why not make them speak his language in the fullest sense of the word? At odd intervals—for fun, for relaxation—he began fiddling with this scene or that, keeping intact what suited him, boldly adding or subtracting as he saw fit.

This always has been Brecht's procedure. As his admirers have it: to adapt, reinterpret, re-create, magnificently add modern social significance; or in his detractors' eyes: to pirate, plagiarize, shamelessly appropriate—to borrow at will from the vanished great like Marlowe and Shakespeare and Villon, and even from his actual or near contemporaries like Kipling and Gorky and Klabund. Critical storms have crashed around Brecht's close-cropped head for more than thirty years—some say the inevitable result of a singular talent, while others snort that they have been shrewdly provoked by a charlatan. "Why deny that Brecht steals?" said a Berlin friend last summer. "But—he steals with genius." Brecht generally has disdained self-defense and held to an enigmatic, smilingly scornful silence. Once another acquaintance rushed from table to table at the Café Romanische, claiming that he had found the real answer to Brecht's enigma on his bedside table—the dust-jacket of *Das Kapital* enclosing an Edgar Wallace thriller. But somebody pointed out that Brecht, who loves pranks and enigmas with-in enigmas, may well have planted it there to snare the snooper.

Whatever the exotic mixture of grist required to turn Brecht's creative mill, nobody doubts today that Elisabeth showed uncanny flair in turning up that copy of *The Beggar's Opera* during that winter of 1927-28. Almost at once Brecht called in Kurt Weill and announced that he had found a play for which Kurt might write "incidental music." Obviously the original Pepusch score no longer would do; something as racy and biting, powerful and modern as Brecht's own language was called for, with as wide and daring a range of reference. No rush, of course, no deadline; time enough for that if a producer gave them the go-ahead after Brecht had shown around a few completed scenes.

This would be the second collaboration of Brecht and Weill, and their first complete play with music. It was Kurt who first had gone to see Brecht early in 1927 (as I remember); he had read poems by Brecht that had stirred him deeply, and which said in words what he felt increasingly drawn to say in music; he also knew Brecht had written one explosively controversial play, *Mann ist Mann*, produced in Darmstadt, that sounded close to his own ideas of theatre. Kurt had written three operas which had been applauded by the most austere music critics; Weill, Krenek, Hindemith were rated as the three most gifted young opera composers in Germany. But Kurt felt strongly that serious composers had withdrawn into too rarefied an atmosphere, he insisted that the widening gap between them and the great public must be bridged at all costs. "What do you want to become, a Verdi of the poor?" scoffingly asked his teacher Busoni. "Is that so bad?" Kurt had replied, deceptively mild. Now, at his first meeting with Brecht, Kurt discovered that Brecht seemed genuinely excited by the idea of writing something that required music. He himself played the guitar, sang old ballads amateurishly but with an odd magnetism, had even composed sketchy accompaniments to ballads that he had written. At the moment he had nothing for Kurt, but he promised



BELOW: The final scene of the original Berlin production is represented in this Lotte Reiniger silhouette. The English adaptation by Marc Blitzstein is duplicating its New York success in a London production. The latter opened on February 9.

In the early thirties a German film version of this modern classic was produced with Miss Lenya once more as Jenny. A quarter century later the score's "Moritat" or "Ballad of Mack the Knife" had become a popular song hit in this country.

to rummage in his head; maybe there was an idea among the scraps of paper he had brought up in a willow basket from Augsburg, his Bavarian birthplace.

And suddenly he did turn up something, not a full play but a cycle of songs about an imaginary city on Florida's Gold Coast, called Mahagonny, to be sung by a mixture of real singers and straight actors, and tied together by a dramatic narrative. The setting was to be a boxing ring, but there were to be no backdrops; instead Caspar Neher would do a series of fantastic drawings to be flashed on a big screen. This is what has been named *Das Kleine Mahagonny*, and no modern work outside of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps* ever created such a scandal at its première, which occurred at the snooty Baden-Baden Festival. Half the public cheered madly, the other half booed and whistled—and Brecht had provided his cast with toy whistles so that they could whistle back. By the way, I sang the prostitute Jenny at the insistence of both authors; until then I had been a dancer and a straight actress, and never had studied singing. I couldn't read a note—exactly why I was chosen! Also, I sang my first song in English, taught me phonetically by Greta Keller: "Oh, moon of Alabama . . ."

But the hard-boiled Berlin theatre world had not been impressed by our clamorous reception at a high-brow festival. If Brecht showed a few producers anything of *Bettler Oper*, as he now called it, no warmly receptive word came back to us. Kurt and I were living in the pension Hassforth on the Louisenplatz; our two rooms were dominated by paintings of a hideously bloody deer hunt, and the furniture was painted pitch-black. (We called it "Grieneisen," after a famous Berlin funeral parlor.) Kurt had two or three pupils and painfully added a little extra to our meager income by writing criticism of radio musical programs. I got an occasional acting job, mostly in suburban theatres. But Kurt was always at his desk by nine (he rarely used the piano when working—except, as Ogden Nash was to note later, as a rest for his pipe), completely absorbed and like a happy child. This was never to change, as a daily routine, except for actual interruption for rehearsals or (continued on page 92)

That Was a Time!

(continued from page 80)

out-of-town tryouts. Brecht came very occasionally to Hassforth's; he preferred that people come to him, which suited Kurt perfectly, although when it was a matter of actual composing, he worked at home alone.

Brecht lived at that time in an attic studio with a skylight, near the intersection Am Knie: no rugs and no curtains to speak of, big iron stove to battle the drafts, typewriter on a massive table, easel on which stood drawings of costumes and sets, huge couch against the wall. On this couch and around the room lounged the ever-present disciples, male and female: the men with hair cropped, and wearing turtle-neck sweaters and slacks; the women without make-up, their hair skinned back, and wearing sweaters and skirts—this highly stylized proletarian style set by the master. Brecht alone stood, looking frail in those days, striding back and forth in a fetid blue cloud from his stogy, pausing for a quick question to this siter, a snap reaction to a line from another; deep-set brown eyes forever blinking, small white hands continuously gesturing, translating everything into terms of theatre. Sometimes soundless laughter would shake him and he would slap his leg in an endearing way until the laughter ended in exhausting pants, leaving him to rub his eyes with the back of his hand and repeat, "*Ja, das Leben . . .*"

When Kurt arrived for a serious work session, the disciples would depart—most often Elisabeth and I stayed on—and the two men would start their discussion. Never have I known such a concentration of pure listening as Kurt could summon up, his face like a young seminarist's behind the thick glasses; his precise answers were made in a quiet, deep voice that held a slight hint of mockery—from shyness, not arrogance, as some people mistakenly thought. Brecht and Kurt had the most enormous respect for each other's opinions, though the relationship never deepened into a strong friendship (as it did between Kurt and Georg Kaiser, and later between Kurt and Maxwell Anderson). Sometimes Brecht impressed on Kurt his own ideas for a song, picking out chords on his guitar. Kurt noted these ideas with his grave little smile and invariably said yes, he would try to

work them in when he got back to Hassforth's.

Early in 1928 we had not heard that a young German actor named Ernst-Josef Aufricht, deciding that he wanted to become a producer, had rented the Schiffbaudamm-Theater. It was—miraculously, still is—a wonderful old house, all red and white and gold, with plaster nymphs, Tritons and cherubs adorably *kitsch*. Located in the principal theatre district, only a few steps from the bustling Friedrichstrasse, it had somehow been bypassed, obscured by big buildings on all sides, vaguely jinxed by repute. Aufricht optimistically began the search for a new play that would reopen his theatre in a blaze of glory. He engaged Heinrich Fischer as *dramaturg*, Erich Engel as director, and Caspar Neher as stage designer, then hounded publishers, pursued agents, haunted those legendary cafés where the gilded Bohemia met. Indeed, it was at Schlichter's that Aufricht remembers catching up with Bert Brecht. Yes, Brecht was deep in a play, but there was still much to be done; besides, it was promised to another producer. Sorry—oh, he had another one, six scenes finished, written with his left hand; well, yes, Aufricht could take a look at it. A few days later, on a drizzly afternoon, Aufricht's maid went to Brecht's studio for the manuscript and returned with its pages soaked through. Aufricht read it through, *dramaturg* Fischer read it through—and amazingly they found themselves wanting it! And for early fall production! No mention, it would appear, of music. Aufricht told me last summer that it wasn't until later, when Brecht brought in additional scenes, that he let it drop that there was to be incidental music by a certain Kurt Weill. Aufricht was horrified. Wasn't Weill that little boy with a reputation as an *enfant terrible* of atonal music? Well, that would be all right, he told Brecht. Secretly he engaged a young musician named Theo Mackeben to look up the original Pepusch music, which later could be substituted for the Weill score.

Then Aufricht advanced his date for the opening of the Schiffbaudamm to August 28—and all deadlines were terrifying to Brecht. A hurried consultation was held, and it was decided that the only way Brecht and Kurt could whip the work still ahead of them was to escape from Berlin. But to where? Somebody suggested a certain quiet little French Riviera resort. Wires

went off for reservations, and on the first of June, Kurt and I left by train, while Brecht drove down with Helen Weigel and their son Stefan. The Brechts had rented a house near the *plage*; we had a room in a pension hotel not far away. The two men wrote and rewrote furiously, night and day, with only hurried swims in between; I recall Brecht wading out, pants rolled up, cap on head, stogy in mouth. I had been given the part of Spelunken-Jenny (Aufricht now says it was after my audition in the tango-ballade that he decided to forget about Pepusch), and Weigel was to play the brothel madam, so we studied our roles. When we got back to Berlin, Brecht and Kurt had ready a nearly complete script for Engel, the director. Neher's sets had been planned, and his drawings finished weeks before. The first rehearsal was upon us.

At no time in theatre history did a play draw near its opening in such an atmosphere of utter doom. The word around Berlin was that Aufricht, poor benighted amateur, was stuck with the turkey of all time. The disasters multiplied. Carola Neher, the ideal Polly, had rushed off to Davos to be with her dying husband Klabund; after frantic telephone calls, she was replaced by Roma Bahn. The actor who was to play Mr. Peachum—could it have been Peter Lorre?—backed out, and Erich Ponto was brought from Dresden. Harald Paulsen, our Mackie, from operetta, and Rosa Valletti, our Mrs. Peachum, a popular star in Berlin cabaret, shouted constant protests. Valletti—of all people, with her gamy repertory!—screamed that she wouldn't sing "those filthy words" in her "Ballad of Dependency," and on the last day of rehearsals signed a contract with another producer, confident that she would be free within the week. Helen Weigel suddenly burst out with a startling idea for her brothel madam—to play her legless à la Lon Chaney, pushing herself around on a wheeled platform; as suddenly, she was stricken with appendicitis and had to be replaced.

Paulsen, vain even for an actor, insisted that his entrance as Mackie Messer needed building up; why not a song right there, all about Mackie, getting in mention if possible of the sky-blue bow tie that he wanted to wear? Brecht made no comment but next morning came in with the verses for the "Moritat" of Mack the Knife and gave them to Kurt to set to music. This currently popular

number, often called the most famous tune written in Europe during the past half century, was modeled after the *moritats* ("mord" meaning murder, "tat" meaning deed) sung by singers at street fairs, detailing the hideous crimes of notorious arch-fiends. Kurt not only produced the tune overnight, he knew the name of the hand-organ manufacturer—Zucco Maggio—who could supply the organ on which to grind out the tune for the prologue. And the "Moritat" went not to Paulsen but to Kurt Gerron, who doubled as Street Singer and Tiger Brown.

Among the distinguished kibitzers who wandered in and out of the stalls, I remember only one who contributed a truly brilliant suggestion—novelist and playwright Lion Feuchtwanger, who suggested a new title for the work: *Die Dreigroschenoper*. Brecht agreed and at once that name went up on the marquee. Actor Fritz Kortner joined with Aufrecht and Engel in trying to persuade Kurt to remove the chorale at the close—"It's out of place, just like Bach." Neher told me years later that he had said to Kurt, "If you ever agree to that, I'll be finished with you forever." In any event the chorale stayed. What was supposed to be the final dress rehearsal, the night before the opening, lasted until after five in the morning. Everybody was completely distraught, shouting and swearing—everybody except Kurt Weill. The brothel scene was torn apart, begun over—and still didn't work. It was after five when I began singing my "Solomon Song"—which was interrupted by the cry, "Stop! Stop!" So that was cut; the show seemed to be running hours too long. We heard that Aufrecht was asking people out front if they knew where he could find a new play in a hurry. Respected Berlin theatre oracles slipped out to spread the word that Brecht and Weill proposed to insult the public with a ludicrous mishmash of opera, operetta, cabaret, straight theatre, outlandish American jazz, not one thing or the other; why didn't they withdraw the work before the opening?

Nor was there to be rest for any of us before the opening. By noon we were back in the theatre and started on a final run-through, only less hysterical because nobody was up to it. Moreover this had been an unusually warm summer, and the day was a hot one. It was late in the afternoon when suddenly a new voice was heard shouting in wild fury: It was Kurt, who had just dis-

covered that my name inadvertently had been omitted from the program. For the first and the last time in his whole theatre career Kurt completely lost control—though not out of consideration for his own interest. Perhaps it was a blessing that I was the one who had to quiet him and assure him that, billing or no billing, nothing could keep me from going on!

There have been many accounts written of that opening night of *Dreigroschen*; it has so truly entered the realm of the fabulous that I shall be brief. Up to the stable scene the audience seemed cold and apathetic, as though convinced in advance that it had come to a certain flop. Then after the *kanonen* song, an unbelievable roar went up, and from that point it was wonderfully, intoxicatingly clear that the public was with us. However, late the next morning as we were waiting for the first reviews, there persisted a crazy unreality about what had happened; nobody quite dared believe in our success. Nor did the reviews confirm it for us—they were decidedly mixed. Hollander wrote that he had slept through the whole performance. Alfred Kerr, the most astute of them all, was greatly impressed, though he wondered if this was to be the new direction of the Berlin theatre. Kurt and I read hurriedly through Kerr's review to the last paragraph, which was headed: "WHO IS SHE?" "From what district does she come? With that lilt in her voice she must be Austrian . . ." He ended: "Watch her. Pretty soon she will be in the limelight." When we had finished with all the reviews, Kurt and I thought it should be possible to move from Hassforth's into a small flat of our own.

From that day Berlin was swept by a *Dreigroschenoper* fever. In the streets no other tunes were whistled.

A *Dreigroschen* bar opened, where no other music was played. Immediately the "Brecht style" and the "Weill style" were slavishly imitated by other dramatists and composers. And Alfred Kerr's prophecy for me came true with dazzling speed. Walking through the Tiergarten I unthinkingly passed a blind beggar who called after me, "Fraulein Lenya, is it only on the stage that you notice a blind beggar?" Perhaps the strangest note of all is that people who scornfully had passed up that opening night began to lie about it, and to claim to have been there, primed for a sure-fire sensation! Even now, anybody who passed through the Berlin of that period, and who comes backstage to see me at the Theatre de Lys in New York, twenty-eight years later, feels compelled to cry, "Of course I was there that opening night!" And though I remember that the Schiffbaudamm had less than eight hundred seats, I nod. Why not, after all? Sometimes, remembering all that madness, even to that blank space in the program, I'm not even sure that I was there myself.

Drama—Speech Radio—Television

Combined with liberal arts courses leading to B.A., B.S., M.A., M.S. degrees. Fully accredited. Day, evening, summer sessions. A completely up-to-date, professionally-equipped electronic television production studio provides outstanding facilities for television training; broadcasting, announcing; writing; radio and television production. Professional acting; directing; playwriting; scene and costume designing. Students play before metropolitan audiences in well-equipped theatre and broadcast from college FM radio station. Coed. Placement assistance.

Catalog: Admissions Secretary

Emerson College

Seventy-sixth Year

128 Beacon Street

Boston 16, Mass.

SENIOR DRAMATIC WORKSHOP

"the School with a Great Tradition"

Dr. Maria Piscator, Director

Dr. Saul Colin, President

SPECIAL SUMMER TERM FOR COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS & TEACHERS JUNE '56

DAY AND NIGHT courses for Beginners. Advanced Professionals, Acting, Directing, Playwriting, Stagecraft, TV and Radio — Terms: June - Oct. - Feb.

JUNIOR DRAMATIC WORKSHOP

Saturdays Only

Age 6 to 18 — Acting, Speech, Dance, Production

Capitol Theatre Bldg. 1639 Broadway, New York 19 Judson 6-4800
Write or Phone for Catalog