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SPECTATOR

*Talk About Movies and Plays
With The People Who Make Them*

STUDS TERKEL



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LOTTE LENYA

1963

She is in Chicago on a tour of *Brecht on Brecht*. We are listening to her recording of the "Moritat" (Mack the Knife) that opens *Threepenny Opera*. Book by Bertolt Brecht, music by Kurt Weill (her husband). Both men have since died.

Margot Asquith spoke of your voice as that of a "disillusioned child singing outside a public house."

I'm still doing it, still singing outside public houses. If somebody asked you to describe my voice, what would you say?

I hear the loneliness, the lostness, the squalor of a city, all this. Also a street smartness. I can think of only two other singers who had this quality: Edith Piaf and Billie Holiday.

I think that's why they wanted me. Their first collaboration was *Die Kleine Mahagonny*, way back in 1927. It was just a collection of songs. Some were used in their big opera, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. This one was just based on five poems by Brecht. It was written for one of those festivals that we have here in Tanglewood. So highbrow, you know. Where the so-called serious composers, Schönberg, Hindemith were played. Brecht said, "I don't think this will go over right away in a highbrow festival like this." So he supplied us with little whistles. Whistling in Germany means disapproval—not like here. He foresaw that. He stood there with his stogie in his mouth and said, "If you hear whistles, whistle right back. Don't let them win. We must win that evening." So it happened: half the house applauded like mad, because it was so unusual in such a festival. All of a sudden the stagehands set up a little boxing ring and two girls, prostitutes, appeared with little suitcases and straw hats and sang something that sounded like "un fella Alabama," in pidgin English. Brecht didn't speak a word of English and he thought this would become the universal language of the world. It was at the time they invented Esperanto. Brecht thought everybody would speak it. He was Bavarian.

You were Viennese.

I still am!

Your dialect was different than Brecht's.

Viennese is a little softer. Brecht's rolling "rrrs" are a little stronger than mine. Of course, with his sharpness in appearance and in his way of talking, he exaggerated the harshness.

There was a touch of gentleness in your voice —

It's still aggressive, just a little bit gentle.

There was tension here that made your voice very exciting. The slight gentleness against the harshness — the combination, the voice of a lost child.

My voice has been described in so many different ways. Critics have disliked my voice, others have praised it. One critic called it, "a

bleak, sour voice,” another said it was “irritable.” If I had listened to everybody, I’d have gone completely crazy and couldn’t sing anymore. I never intended to be a Callas. So I sing it the only way I can and this is it. It’s not a voice that “comes out of no-man’s land,” as one critic said. I resent that. I know exactly what I’m singing, of emotions any human being goes through in life.

My husband, Kurt Weill, wasn’t just a songwriter. He had studied twelve-tone with Busoni. His first opera was atonal. He wasn’t that interested in “serious” opera, though he was serious about his music. He was losing interest in chamber music, too. That’s when he met Brecht.

He said, “I want my music to be sung by people.” Some say he didn’t care about posterity. That’s nonsense. Any creative person thinks about that. What he meant was he’d like to live long enough to hear his music played and sung. He was lucky. He was a *theater* composer. At the same time, he said, “I don’t want to hold back my horses.” In German, it sounds so much better. [Laughs]

He lived in two worlds, the world of musical theater and opera. He fulfilled his dream in America, when he wrote *Street Scene*.*

ARNOLD SUNDGAARD

An American composer, he wrote the libretto of the folk opera, *Down in the Valley*. Kurt Weill wrote the music.

I had written folk songs in a somewhat Brechtian style. That’s how I met Weill. I know it seems strange that a German refugee could work on something so indigenously American as *Down in the Valley*. We know that so many European writers were fascinated with America and wrote about it even though they may never have been here.

Kurt said he loved the American sounds. Names like Susque-

*An American opera based on Elmer Rice’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play of the same name.

hanna and Monongahela. He told me that he and Brecht both thought that Alabama was pronounced “Alabamee” because they had heard Al Jolson sing it that way.

One of your most celebrated songs is “Surabaya Johnny.” There’s a recitative in it; you both talk and sing.

Sprechgesang, we call it in German. This is the eternal cry of the creature who gave everything she had and he deserts her. She knows it from the beginning. It’s very difficult for young singers. If you get too emotional in the singing, it carries over into the speaking. And the other way around. The bridge is difficult. Brecht adored *Sprechgesang*.* Oh, my God, he loathed traditional singers. He loathed opera. Very unjust, a fanatic on that. When actors audition, some feel they have to prepare themselves emotionally. This one actress drove him crazy. She stood there with her back to the audience. Brecht asked, “What is she doing?” The stage manager said she was getting ready for the audition. Brecht said, “Send her home and let her come back when she’s unemotional.”

In Brecht’s theater, you had to be ready any time. Never mind “preparing.” Never mind “putting myself in the mood.” An actor has to be able to create any mood any time, wherever he plays, whether it’s in a barn or in the street, on A or on Z. It’s just being in complete control of the moment. You make the *audience* feel the mood.

A young actor, who uncritically follows the Stanislavsky technique, known as the Method, would have a hard time with Brecht.

Oh, my God, yes. He’d throw him out. Wasting too much time. That’s why I’m in love with making movies. You have to concentrate on the spot, on the moment. They may start the scene from the last or from the middle, so its instantaneous concentration. I like it because it’s easy for me. Brecht trained me that way.

**Addio del passato*, Violetta’s aria in *La Traviata*, is especially moving because it was preceded by her letter reading, spoken-word scene. Hearing Claudia Muzio’s recording never fails to knock me out. Call it *Sprechgesang*, Italian style.

Speaking of controlling the moment, there's a scene in Threepenny Opera where you, as Jenny, betray your lover, Macheath, the crook-hero, to the police. There was a certain gesture you used — a flick of the wrist against your forehead and a snap of the fingers. Didn't this become a symbol among young people in Germany during Hitler times?

Yes, whenever there was a betrayal, people didn't have to say anything. They didn't have to say, "She betrayed him." They just used the gesture I made in *Threepenny Opera* and they knew. It was a gesture in Berlin for a while until it wore out.

Aside from Threepenny Opera, the most provocative of all the Brecht-Weill works may be The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny.

Mahagonny is an invented word. *Das is kein Ort*. There is no such place. It's an imaginative American city during the Gold Rush. A no-man's land. Everything is allowed in Mahagonny. You can kill, you can rob, you can do anything. It's OK. There's only one crime which you pay for with your life: being poor, running out of money. Brecht is a moralist.

Some of the songs in Mahagonny, like the Alabama song, have a sweet, sentimental pop quality.

It's a take-off, joking, those kind of songs.

Alabama rhyming with mama, so "we've lost our good old mama." And sweetly singing, "We must have dollars, you know why." Harsh ideas sweetly sung. Am I assuming a great deal here?

You're assuming in the right direction. It's a take-off on Al Jolson with "Mammy" also. There are many things that sneak in.

The song, "As You Make Your Bed," I'm saying this to my lover in *Mahagonny*, Jimmy Mahoney. He is so drunk, he's asleep on the billiard table. They are both so drunk, they think they've sailed away to Alaska. The music stops, they're still in that bar. The owner says, "Pay your bill." He said, "I can't. I've run out of money." She turns to Jenny. "Can you help him out?" Jenny says, "I? That's funny what they ask girls to do. No, I haven't any money." Then she

sings to Jimmy, whom she loves, "How you make your bed, you lie in it." Love is love, but money is money. So Jimmy dies for lack of money.

[We are looking at a photograph of Brecht, Weill, Hindemith, Lenya.] I'm sure this question has been asked of you many times. Berlin, at the time, may have had the most creative artists in the Western world: Schönberg, Reinhardt, Klee, Kandinsky, Jannings, you name 'em. Yet, fascism was just around the corner.

It was very strange. Zero hour for freedom in Germany. Yet we were still undisturbed by Hitler. When *Mahagonny* was done in Leipzig in 1930, it caused such a riot. Such turmoil broke out, whistling and applauding and throwing chairs and fistfights. They had to turn on all the lights to finish. The next day when it was repeated, there was a policeman at every exit. The lights were on the whole time, so they could arrest somebody if he started a riot. Eventually, they had to cancel it. The Nazis were already around the corner.

Strange, you know, when you're in a time like that. When you're young and ambitious and excited about your work, you're less concerned with the outside world. You're thinking about what you want to achieve with your life. We were aware of what was happening around us, but we were actors. Stupidly so. That was our profession and that was what we did. So all those disturbances from the outside didn't affect us very much. In looking back, no.

Brecht and Weill had something to say. That made us ten times as courageous because we believed in what we were saying. Playing Brecht now, when you listen to these songs and what they say, it's as true now as it was then and probably will be true a hundred years from now. I think the things he was attacking are still around—corruption and poverty. What do you think?

You're asking me?

Yes or no?

[Laughing] Yes.

[We are listening to a Lenya recording of "Surabaya Johnny," a torch song of a love betrayed.]

Whenever I've sung these Weill songs and read Brecht's words to young people in America, I've found it fascinating. College students, a lot. At first you think they don't understand it. Then comes this thunderous applause. A teacher wrote me: they are too shy to ask when they come backstage. They just look at me with their big eyes and ask for an autograph. But teachers tell me it's had a terrific effect on them. . . . I hope.