

'Sblood, the Threepenny Opera!

Brechtgesang



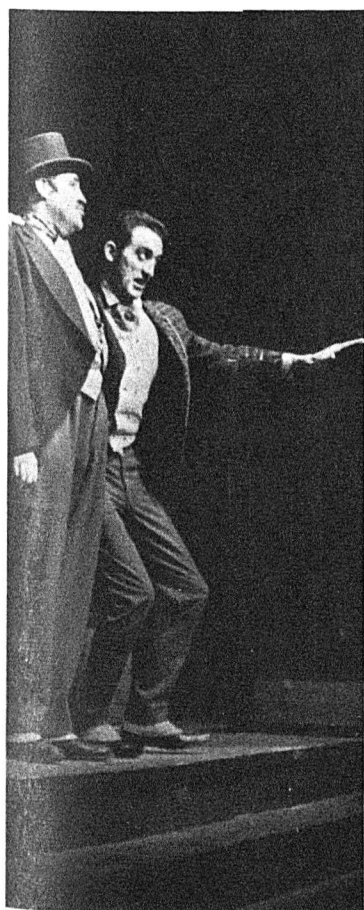
—Derek Nash photo

KING LEER?—Well, maybe; but really it's Captain MacHeath (Bob Brown King) gazing appreciatively at his new bride, Polly Peachum (Gayle Swymer). Also present in this scene from the Citadel's production of *The Threepenny Opera* are two members of Mac's gang and a lady who didn't want to be identified.

Brecht, Brecht, Brecht, on thy cold grey boards, o Citadel!

— Alfred, Lord Tenniscourtoaf

The *Threepenny Opera* by Bertolt Brecht is basically an expose of poverty and thievery in early Victorian London, with a slight



—Derek Nash photo

COP AND ROBBER
... bosom buddies

turn of the screw. The poverty is planned.

One Mr. Peachum (played at the Citadel by a somewhat Will Rogersish Jay Bonnell) pays laid-off workers to beg in certain specific areas of London. Peachum is in effect a capitalist who deliberately creates and exploits poverty while on the surface pretending to be a champion of the underprivileged.

Peachum's daughter (Gayle Swymer) falls in love with and makes a somewhat dubious marriage with arch-criminal MacHeath, who is lovingly known as Mack the Knife (Bob Brown King). This debonair gentleman runs a well-organized and thriving thievery which steals from the rich and gives mostly to MacHeath, all under the protection of Tiger Brown, Commissioner of Police (Denis Kalman).

The plot consists basically of Mr. and Mrs. (Karen Looze) Peachum's attempts to recover their daughter from MacHeath. This eventually results in MacHeath's imprisonment and imminent hanging. What actually happens to Mackie, however, must be seen to be disbelieved.

Robert Glenn's production marks a significant alteration in the aura of Citadel drama.

Previous work at this Broadway bastion has been little more than a luke-warm recrudescence of the original offering, Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee left his mark on the Citadel and it has remained until now.

A better playwright has been allowed to erase that mark (although Albee is by no means poor).

There is a strange, perhaps even disturbing, consistency about the present production. Brecht's subtle power comes through in spite of a translation which is not all it should be, and in spite of the fact that the production is in part, at least, the work of amateurs in professional guise. Brecht will probably loom over the Citadel for some time to come.

The disturbing consistency is one of satiric tone. The characters begin and remain on a level somewhere between realism and pure comedy.

They are the degenerates created by Charles Dickens without the characteristic Dickensian sentimentality. At no time does one identify with them, and yet seldom does one fail to be intrigued by them.

On the emotional level they are at most a destructive parody of all that is wrong with sentimental grovelling.

They work towards the inevitable (and very Marxian) destruction of a parody criminal hero (criminal saint?), and then to taunt the supercilious audience (whom they have sucked in with their seditious lightheartedness) they allow, nay, invite that hero to be saved.

The cause of this disturbing consistency is the total and brilliant absence of depth in all the characters. They show their little bits of significance as obviously as if they had signs posted on their backs.

As a result no character is dominant. Each is equally important. And each actor is equally effective, though he be lacking in stage presence like Denis Kalmon,

(Editor's note: The following article is reprinted—in a slightly abridged form—from the Citadel program. Raymond Allen is the musical director for the Citadel production of *The Threepenny Opera*.)

In 1728 two men named Pepusch and Gay compiled an opera that would at long last be something the masses could afford and understand. It was called *The Beggar's Opera*—in English with tunes the people could either recognize or at least "hum" when they left the theatre. It was a SMASH! The story was understandable and believable; the music was taken from tunes that were heard on the streets. Poor Mr. Handel. This show ran longer than *My Fair Lady*!

And this brings us up to 1928 when one of the most famous playwrights in Germany collaborated with one of the most important German musicians to bring to us (and doubtless generations to come) an updated *Beggar's Opera*—what is now called *Die Dreigroschenoper* or *The Three Penny Opera*.

The form of *Threepenny* is the same as the form used in the 18th century. The songs themselves do not carry a story line nor give the drama any impetus. But the general setup is that there is a scene, then a song which reflects or comments on what has transpired—as in opera, the Recitative Aria (scene song) idea.

When the curtain rose in the theatre am Schiffbauerdamm Berlin, August 31, 1928, the audience expected theatre that was daringly and shockingly direct. The music—both popular and sophisticated—was strikingly different and totally unexpected. The audience was swept off its seat.

In his revolt against operatic tradition, Dr. Pepusch compiled his scores for Gay's play from popular airs. Kurt Weill went a step further and composed his own airs. (There is one notable exception: Mr. Peachum's first song "Morning Anthem" is taken directly from *The Beggar's Opera*.)

Just as the libretto is humorous, so is the score. It's peppered with biting witticisms. The music is often in direct opposition to the expected mood of the lyrics—therein lies the satirical candor. The lyrics of the "Ballad of Sexual Dependency" are—frankly—bawdy, while the music is subtle and quite suitable for drawing room consumption. The Finale of Act I, the title of which is "The World is Mean" has a feeling (for the most part) of some of the most charming moments of Gilbert and Sullivan.

Aside from the fact that Weill's music often belies the feeling of the lyrics for humorous and dramatic effects, there is a great deal of humor in a purely musical sense. "The Jealousy Duet", in which Polly and Lucy literally spit a barrage of investives at each other, is suddenly interrupted by a saccharine sentimental section in which they sing in harmony. The result of which is very comical and all for a purely musical reason!

While musical satire is rampant throughout the score, the finale of *Threepenny* is very parodistic. In this section, Brecht and Weill, rather than trying to break from operatic traditions like Pepusch and Gay, use these traditions to poke fun.

—Raymond Allen



—Derek Nash photo

WAPPING FLING
... a spinning Jenny

—Peter Montgomery