THE THREEPENNY OPERA
Secrets of its Success
Martin Esslin

The Beggar’s Opera — Dreigroschenoper — Threepenny Opera is without doubt one of the most successful works in the history of theatrical performance. Its first production at Lincoln’s Inn Fields in 1728 became what was then the longest-ever run of a play on the London stage — 62 performances. At its major revival by Nigel Playfair at the Lyric Theatre Hammersmith in London in the 1920s it ran for almost 1500 performances — in its modernised Berlin version by Brecht and Weill as The Threepenny Opera in 1928 it became the hitherto longest run in the history of the Berlin theatre; and in its New York version of the 1950s at the Theatre de Lys off-Broadway it ran and ran and ran.

What is the secret of this evergreen appeal of what seems at first sight a slight creation — a mere parodic joke about pompous operatic sentimentality at its inception, a piece of cabaretic political satire, an occasional piece that both Brecht and Weill regarded as a minor sideline to their more serious endeavors, a mere potboiler?

Perhaps a brief, somewhat anecdotal, account of the genesis of this work that, never taken particularly seriously by its own authors but undoubtedly of major importance in the history of popular theatre, might lead us towards an understanding of the reasons for its immediate impact and enduring vitality through more than two and a half centuries.

Indeed, it may precisely be the casual nature of its origin that at least to some extent contains the answer to that question. The randomly fired arrow, as the Zen philosophy has it, might most surely hit its target, or as Lao Tzu suggests in the Tao-te-king, when two armies are locked in battle, the one that is less eager to win will in fact emerge as the victor.

Casual the genesis of the play may have been, yet though it may have been just a by-product of more ambitious enterprises, it came from a most high-powered environment. Some of the greatest names of eighteenth century English — and indeed world — literature fathered the original idea for it — Jonathan Swift, the great satirist, and Alexander Pope the leading poet of the Augustan age. Swift and Pope were the presiding influences in a coterie of Tory intellectuals who indulged in the pastime of collectively producing an ongoing satirical work The Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus which ridiculed all the shallow and fashionable fads of the time. Next to Swift and Pope the leading members of this Scriblerus club were Dr John Arbuthnot, mathematician, physician and poet, and the modest poet John Gay, author of, among others, such “city pastoral poems” as: Trivia or Walking the Streets of London, published in 1716.

It was shortly after that, in the context of searching for subjects for Scriblerian satire, that Swift wrote to Pope about the further possibilities of such mock-pastoral poems: “...if our friend Gay could fancy it... I believe the pastoral ridicule is not exhausted; and that a porter, footman or chairman’s pastoral might do well. Or what think you of a Newgate Pastoral among the whores and thieves there...” Pope passed the idea on to Gay. And over the next decade the seed planted by Swift and Pope germinated in Gay’s mind. Gradually the idea of a parody of a pastoral poem where the idyllic setting of the happy groves inhabited by love-born shepherds might be replaced by the sordid environment of London’s notorious Newgate Prison, and the gamboling swains and maidens by hardened thieves and whores, developed in his mind under the impact of the enormous vogue of opera that was sweeping the town in the 1720s, into a that of a mock-pastoral opera.

The great German composer George Frederick Handel, now triumphantly having conquered England, ruled the roost of the theatrical scene. Gay himself had experience of the genre of this kind of classical pastoral, he had written the libretto for Handel’s opera Acis and Galatea about the nymph pursued by the monster Polyphemus. But the Scriblerus club had also more directly political objectives -- they saw the Hanoverian king’s chief minister Sir Robert Walpole as a breeder of corruption. Gay could point up a parallel between the head of the government and the notorious Jonathan Wild, who was both the godfather of the underworld and the main police-informer. He financed thieves and shared their spoils, but when they became less productive, denounced them to the authorities and pocketed the rewards. He became
the model for Gay’s character of Peachum, the king of the beggars and narks, whose motto was: “When they are no longer of use, impeach them!” “Peach’ em!” It is Peachum’s opening aria of the play that sets the tone:

Through all the employments of life
Each neighbor abuses his brother;
Whore and Rogue they call Husband and Wife
All profession be-vogue one another.

The priest calls the lawyer a cheat,
The lawyer be-knaves the divine.
And the statesman because he’s so great,
Thinks his trade as honest as mine.

This is sung to the tune of an old ballad (“An old woman clothed in gray”). For on another level of satire the play is a “ballad opera,” where the high artifice of grand opera’s coloratura arias, is replaced by the tunes of old pop-songs, folk ballads. Gay and the arranger of the music John Christopher Pepusch, like Handel, a naturalised German, had created a new genre, the ballad opera, a musical theatre based on pop-tunes, which ultimately developed into operetta and today’s musical.

The leading London theatre, Drury Lane, rejected the piece, so it got its first performance in January 1728 at the less prestigious theatre at Lincoln’s Inn’s Fields, run by John Rich.

An immediate success, it was said that it made Rich gay and Gay rich. And it made the government furious. When Gay tried to follow up its success with a sequel — Polly (in which the heroine follows her lover, who has been transported to the Americas) it was banned by Walpole — and the consequence was the introduction of stage censorship, which lasted in Britain till 1968.

*The Beggar’s Opera* became an evergreen success. The story of the gallant highwayman MacHeath (so called because Hampstead Heath on the northern approaches to London was the favorite spot for ambushing travellers and stage-coaches) and his lovers Polly and Lucy and his stable of whores, was frequently revived throughout the eighteenth century, less so in the more puritanical Victorian age.

After the First World War, in the 1920s, that age of a renewed, somewhat feverish joie de vivre, *The Beggar’s Opera* was re-discovered by the highly talented London actor and impresario Nigel Playfair, who staged a successful revival at his own theatre, the Lyric, Hammersmith in 1920 and again in 1925. This, with brilliantly colorful sets and costumes by Lovat Fraser, proved a sensational hit and ran for almost 1500 performances. The news of it reached Brecht’s secretary, collaborator and lover, Elisabeth Hauptmann, who got hold of a script, realized its potential for Brecht, and began to translate it.

And now, we are now exactly two-hundred years after the opening of Gay’s play — 1928. And we are in Berlin. A young man, Ernst Josef Aufricht by name, who has been an actor, has inherited 100,000 Marks, a considerable sum for those years. With this money he has decided to become a theatrical producer and has acquired the lease of an old theatre with a considerable history, but now standing empty, the Theater am Schilfbauerdamm — That is: “theatre on the shipbuilders’ quai.” And he is looking for a play with which to open the house. It must be a new play, progressive in tendency — he is left-inclined — and somehow different. He approaches agents, playwrights, but without success. In his memoirs he tells us:

“I’ll have to commit suicide, if I don’t find anything. Now all that’s left is to try the artists’ hang-outs, the bars, Schwanneke’s or Schlchter’s. So we (Aufricht and his dramaturg Heinrich Fischer) went to Schlchter’s in Lutherstrasse. On the walls hang pictures by the owner, the painter Schlchter, for sale. In the second room, there sat a man. It was Brecht. I did not know him personally, but I knew his experimental work, and I liked his poems. His long face had the ascetic expression of a monk, sometimes the slyness of a ne'er-do-well... We sat down at his table and put our question. He started to tell us a plot on which he was working at the moment. But he must have noticed that we weren’t interested, because we were already asking for the check. “But I also have something I have started as a sideline. You could see six out of a total of seven scenes. It’s an adaptation of Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera.* I have given it the title Gesindel — Riff-raff — it deals with a corruption scandal, the gangster is a friend of the police-chief...”

This story smelled of theatre. We agreed that
we’d fetch the manuscript next morning from the Spichernstrasse, where Brecht had his lodgings.

Heinrich Fischer, Aufricht’s dramaturg, at that time 36 years old, is my personal link to this story. He was for many years my colleague and friend in the German department of the BBC during the war. And he has often told me how actively he, as dramaturg, contributed to the process of the collective creation of the piece. For example: it was Heinrich Fischer who drew Brecht’s attention to the ballads of the great French medieval vagrant poet Francois Villon which had appeared in a very good new German translation. Brecht incorporated some of these, notably the brothel ballad, and MacHeath’s plea for forgiveness on the gallows, in his text.

Aufricht read the script — as much of it as already existed — liked it and decided to open his theatre with the play. But he was taken aback when he heard that there was also a musician involved, Kurt Weill. That frightened him — he knew Weill as an ultra-modern atonal composer. So he arranged — as a precaution to have someone adapt Pepusch’s original 18th century music.

All this happened at the end of March and the beginning of April 1928. Aufricht had decided to open his theatre on 31 August — the traditional beginning of the fall and winter season. Rehearsals were scheduled to start on 1 August. But of course the text was by no means as ready as Brecht had pretended. And Weill had not even started on the piece. So Brecht and Weill decided to go into retreat, somewhere quiet, where they would not be disturbed — the south of France. Brecht set out by car with Helene Weigel and their three-year old son Stefan, Weill and his wife Lotte Lenya by train. The Weills arrived on 5 May, the Brechts a few days later. And so at the village of St Cyr, near Le Lavandou, east of Toulon, they set to work. Lotte Lenya has described the scene:

“Brecht had taken a house on the seashore, we had a room in a small pension near-by. The two men worked like mad. Day and night they wrote, altered, cut, and wrote again. They only interrupted work for a few minutes to go down to the sea. I can still see Brecht as he waded through the water, his trousers turned up, his cap on his head, and his familiar Virginia cigar in his mouth.” By mid-June they were back in Berlin. But even now the script was by no means finished. In fact, it was in constant flux right to the moment of the opening.

Rehearsals started on 1 August. Aufricht was still worried about the music. One day Weill turned up and said he wanted to play his score for him, and shocked him by adding the demand that his wife had to be given the part of Jenny, one of the whores.

“I was taken aback by this,” Aufricht reports in his autobiography, “I didn’t know Lotte Lenya as an actress, had never heard of her. Nevertheless I said, all right, for she looked talented, moved well and I liked her looks. ‘Weill is also going to compose a song for me,’ she said, by the door. Rather cheeky, I thought, and — that little man Weill doesn’t really deserve so attractive a wife. And then that little, bespectacled man with his soft, metallic voice .... started to play and sing. I think we were all disconcerted at first, but after a while Vamberg, my second dramaturg, whispered in my ear: ‘this music is as much a basis for success as the play itself’.”

The rehearsal period turned into a nightmare. In Lotte Lenya’s words: “I don’t think that any play in the history of theatre experienced such a chain of catastrophes so near the first night.” The female lead, Carola Neher, who was to play Polly, was married to the well-known poet Kluband (famous translator of Chinese poetry, including the old Chinese play the Chalk Circle, which Brecht later adapted), he was suffering from consumption in Switzerland and was dying. Carola Neher had to go and join him. Four days before the opening a new Polly had to be found. A young unknown Roma Bahn took it on. The leading man, the operetta star Harald Paulsen, a very vain and handsome figure, insisted on playing MacHeath in an elegant drawing-room suit with a most flamboyant blue silk scarf designed to match his blue eyes. When the director, Erich Engel, objected to this as being overly-pretty and sweet, Paulsen started to shout in such a wild tantrum that one had to fear for his voice.

Brecht had an idea: “Let’s keep him so dandified, camp and charming. We’ll introduce him with a ballad about all his horrible misdeeds. It will make him look even more sinister with his kitschy shawl. That is how, at the very last moment, Brecht added the “Ballad of Mac the Knife” as an afterthought.

Brecht’s wife, Helene Weigel, was to play the madam in the brothel scene. She wanted to play the
part as a legless paraplegic in a wheel-chair. But she developed an appendix infection, and her doctor would not allow her to go on. So that whole role was cut at the last moment. And still the play was too long, new drastic cuts had to be made.

Even the title was not yet fixed. It was Lion Feuchtwanger, the well-known novelist and Brecht’s patron in Munich, who happened to look in and came up with the idea to call the piece The Threepenny Opera. Caspar Neher, Brecht’s school-fellow, the designer (no relation of Carola Neher), painted the words of the title with black paint on the half-curtain of rough sack-cloth which had been found at the last moment to replace a velvet one which had turned out too kitschily pretty. Another famous personality who attended the rehearsals was Karl Kraus, the great Viennese satirist, probably the only twentieth-century writer who could be regarded as an equivalent to the play’s only begetter, Jonathan Swift. He was a close friend of Heinrich Fischer, Aufricht’s dramaturg — (when he died, he left Fischer the copyright of his works) -- and had been invited by him to watch the rehearsals. Kraus thought that Polly’s and Lucy’s jealousy-duet was too short, so he wrote a second verse, which Brecht gratefully accepted and incorporated in the text.

There were rows right up to the moment when the curtain was to rise. Weill was in hysteric because his wife’s name had been omitted from the cast-list in the program. There was a major technical problem with the horse that was to carry the messenger with MacHeath’s pardon in the last scene. Some of the leading actors were so convinced the production would close immediately, that they had already signed new contracts with other theatres. After the last rehearsal, Brecht shouted, “I’ll never set foot into this theatre again.” Weill and Neher added: “and neither shall I!”

But, Aufricht reports, as good troopers they all turned up punctually at seven thirty. And then the moment of truth arrived. Let Aufricht take up the story:

“I activated the bell, the sign to start. The overture took the form of a fugue. The public was dumbfounded. The curtain rose: members of the cast stood around a hurdy-gurdy and Kurt Gerron, the actor, dressed as the hurdy-gurdy man, started to turn the handle and to sing about the shark and his teeth, but no sound came from the instrument. It hadn’t been turned on. At last, on the second verse, the band took up the melody. What a relief?” The public sat silent through the first scenes. Aufricht goes on:

“I noticed how Fischer’s knees, in the seat next to me, trembled. The wedding scene started. Nobody laughed at the places that were supposed to be funny. The audience was frozen. Then suddenly, after the cannon song, the breakthrough came. The auditorium didn’t just slowly thaw. It suddenly reached boiling point. Clapping, shouting, trampling with their feet, people demanded an encore. I had forbidden all encores, as being too vulgar for a serious theatre. But now, as they did not allow the actors to go on, and they helplessly looked at me in my box, I agreed to a “da capo.” From that moment every sentence, every note of music was a success.”

The next morning brought the reviews: the arch conservative Kreuz-Zeitung called the play an example of literary necrophilia.” The communist Rote Fahne deplored its lack of Marxist relevance: “If you feel weak,” it wrote, “you lean upon stronger stuff; if you confront the present with more or less complete lack of understanding, you flee into the past, if you don’t know how to represent the revolutionary movement of the working class, you try to dabble in the aimless and sullen moods of the Lumpenproletariat.”

The other reviews were mildly positive: Brecht’s most faithful supporter among the Berlin critics, Herbert Ihering wrote: “it is a triumph of the open form. What Brecht as adaptor, Weill as composer have achieved with this slight sideline of a work is to have gone beyond the pattern of revue to a blending of elements of vaudeville into a new and vital form of theatrical expression.” But the audiences loved it. For the first time in his life Brecht had a real financial success. He had shrewdly prepared it. The contract with Felix Bloch Erben, the publishers, gave Elisabeth Hauptmann, the translator of the original, 12 percent, Weill 26, and Brecht a full 62 percent of the royalties. In the long run, when the vast bulk of the royalties was due to the sale of recordings of the songs, this turned out to have been a great injustice to Weill. Lotte Lenya was fuming about it to me forty years later.
And other scandals and controversy followed: Alfred Kerr, the most influential of the Berlin critics discovered that Brecht had used an existing translation of Villon’s ballads for some of the songs (to which Heinrich Fischer had drawn his attention) and denounced him as a thief and plagiarist, challenging him to explain himself. Brecht replied in his usual, casual manner, that he explained it by his “usual laxity in matters of literary property.” And Karl Kraus, Kerr’s long-standing arch-enemy, came to Brecht’s defense. By changing as little as a comma or a single syllable in the original text, Brecht had turned plain verse into brilliant poetry and proved his genius.

The first night had been witnessed by the great Russian director Alexander Tairov, who acquired the rights and staged the play in Moscow just before the heavy hand of Stalinist socialist realism fell on all avant-garde theatre in the Soviet Union. All over Europe The Threepenny Opera was translated and staged. Within a year of the first night it had reached 4000 performances in 120 theatres, and in Central Europe alone the play was translated within the first five years into no fewer than 18 languages.

A film company acquired the rights. G.W. Pabst was to direct the film version. By this time Brecht had woken up to the fact that he had produced a work with much greater political potential than he had originally envisaged. So he produced a screenplay that was infinitely more Marxist, with Polly setting up as a banker and MacHeath turning into a major capitalist at the end. Disputes with the production company broke out, Brecht’s screenplay was re-adapted by another writer, Brecht sued and was awarded a very large sum in compensation for non-use of his script. But the film was made according to the new screenplay, with Carola Neher, who had missed the part in the opening production, as Polly (by now she was Brecht’s lover, probably the greatest love of his life, in spite of the fact that Brecht had at last got married to Weigel in April 1929. After Hitler came to power Neher, a dedicated communist, emigrated to the Soviet Union only to perish miserably in the great Stalin purges).

At that time — 1930 — before synchronization came into use, films were often shot simultaneously in two versions. The Threepenny Opera film was done in German and French. In the French version another great name of theatrical history became associated with the Threepenny Opera — Antonin Artaud spent several weeks in Berlin playing in the French takes the part of the young man who is applying to Peachum to be employed as one of his beggars and is getting fitted out.

As I mentioned before: it may well have been the very lack of any intention to create a lasting masterpiece that contributed to success of The Threepenny Opera. The work grew as it was constructed, it absorbed the suggestions and contributions of a number of by-standers and, as it did, so it distilled essential aspects of the Zeitgeist, the general atmosphere of its epoch and location. The Threepenny Opera expresses, as no other work of the time, the Berlin of the brief window of relative well-being when Weimar Germany flourished — between the horrors of mega-inflation which came to an end around 1925 and the great depression which started around 1930.

The very fact that from its inception two-hundred years earlier it had been a parody, a satire, gave it that ironic ambivalence that made it equally acceptable to the left-wing avant-garde of the time — Brecht was at that very moment in the process of absorbing the dialectical thought-processes of Marxism — and to the affluent profiteers of that brief spell of prosperity who sat in the auditorium of the theatre on the Schiffbauerdamm.

Is it a coincidence that the explosive turning point of the first night came after the song of the ex-soldiers who remember the great times they had in the war. The song is a satire, it obviously aims to describe the brutality of imperialist war. But did not the sentimental depiction of the comradeship of the boys who sat on the guns, and, when they encountered a new race, white or black, made beefsteak tartar, mince-meat, of them, also express the deepest desires of sections of the audience? How many of the men who got up and demanded an encore on that night in August 1928, would only a few years later vote for a party that boasted in its election manifesto that it would indeed make mince-meat of alien races?

And if the song about the advantages of living in affluence rather than as a starving intellectual
was meant to depict the mindlessness of a stupid consumerist bourgeoisie, clearly a very large proportion of the audience would have wholeheartedly subscribed to those sentiments. The brothel ballad clearly condemns the horrors of prostitution in a capitalist society, but how many of the men in the audience who lived in a town teeming with the establishments so brilliantly depicted by the drawings of Brecht’s friend George Grosz, had enjoyed a situation in which, when they paid up, the pimp told them, “if you want her again, please, come again, you’re welcome!” and that to nostalgically sentimental music?

And the two great finales which show the world as seen by the ideology of man-eats-man-capitalism — The world is poor and man is bad — and again — Mankind lives by misdeeds alone, meant clearly to show the wickedness and folly of such a view as against the socialist, Rousseauist conviction that humanity is basically good and only perverted by wicked institutions — how many of the middle-class audience of the first-night would have enthusiastically agreed with those sentiments and simply concluded that in such a world one just had to pursue one’s own advantage as ruthlessly as possible.

These misunderstandings of the bitter satirical irony of the sentiments expressed in such songs certainly contributed a great deal to the initial success of the Threepenny Opera. But the piece also profited, I believe, from other ambivalences at a much deeper level: the depiction of the a-moral milieu, a world of whores, thieves, and corrupt officials, just a satirical flip-side picture of the opposite of a decent moral society — as surely the author of the original Beggar’s Opera intended it, or did it not contain at least some of the anti-bourgeois tendencies of a dedicated rebel against stuffy respectability like Brecht himself? If Brecht spoke of his own laxity in matters of literary property, to what extent did he see himself as at least to some extent a re-incarnation of Mac the Knife? And MacHeath’s polygamous life-style certainly chimed in with Brecht’s ideology and practice.

During his stay at St Cyr, where he was working on the text of The Threepenny Opera, Brecht suffered from lack of access to his favorite detective fiction and was compelled to fall back on reading the Confessions of St Augustine. He noted in his diary: “He (i.e. Augustine), put great store on chastity. As to that, I think, by the way, that we have a very deficient and gross idea of the profits to be derived from it.”

And underneath he listed some of his own principles of conduct:

“Not for sociability but for men’s talk
Not for love but for lust
Not for good eating but for quenching one’s hunger
Not for play but for work
Not for leisure but for laziness
Not for girls but for women”

So at least to a certain extent the underworld of the play represented not just a negative satirical flip-side, but embodied some of the positive sides of an anti-bourgeois attitude. And that certainly strengthened the power of the poetry behind the sexual side of MacHeath’s story. And what is more: to a newspaper questionnaire asking writers to name the books that had most influenced them at that time, Brecht replied: “You’ll laugh — the Bible.” Not only is the text of The Threepenny Opera rich in biblical phraseology, as in the opening lines of Peachum’s: “Wake up you rotten Christian” or in the quotations from the Song of Solomon in the love-duet ... the plot itself is a parody of the gospel. After all MacHeath is betrayed to the authorities by a traitor’s kiss. In the third verse of the “Ballad of Sexual Enslavement,” it is expressly stated that Jenny received her “Judas-Lohn” — her Judas’ wages. And the miraculous redemption of MacHeath under the gallows is clearly a parody of the resurrection. Mac the Knife is an ironic avatar of Christ himself. Here too it is obvious that Brecht was making fun of Christianity, but the emotional power of such parody clearly also must be nourished by the subconscious investment of deep religious feelings in early childhood.

The Threepenny Opera thus, it seems to me, derived much of its power at the time of its creation — and ever since — from the peculiar advantage of all parody — that the very savagery of the attack on what is being parodied contains and pre-supposes a deep hidden involvement with that very subject matter, that the parody depends on the strength of the author’s concern, even hidden
admiration, with what is being parodied. After all, he takes the trouble to imitate it — and imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

This ambivalence is a powerful root of the success of *The Threepenny Opera*. The sentimental melodies of the love songs or the brothel ballad can be enjoyed as brilliantly popular, even kitsch melodies, while at the same time, they allow the more sophisticated among the listeners to laugh at the brilliance with which such kitsch is being parodied and ridiculed. Whichever way the piece is enjoyed, it gets the best of both worlds: the outrageous a-moral behavior of the characters can give rise to the pleasure of indignation at such baseness and fill the spectator with delicious feelings of moral superiority, while, at the same time, giving him the thrills of the voyeur of sexually explicit or brutally violent material.

If such were the sources of the success of *The Threepenny Opera* in 1928, to what extent are they still valid today, seventy years later? Clearly what at that time was regarded as outrageous or obscene has lost a great deal of its ability to shock. Much of the bourgeois double-standard morality it attacks has since been eroded, at least in urban milieus like Berlin, London, New York or San Francisco. The political situation, which here -- in contrast to most other works by Brecht -- is still implied rather than explicit has also fundamentally changed.

What remains for our time? I think: the compassion with which the life of people in the lowest reaches of society is treated, the humor with which the play laughs about itself, and above all: the poetry and the music.

Brecht’s lyrics — at least in the original, no translation can quite capture their concision and power — are truly immortal. And Weill’s achievement lies in transporting that poetic power into the area that lies beyond language -- music.

It was, from the very beginning the power of Brecht’s poetry that had brought Brecht and Weill together. Weill had, by the mid 1920s achieved considerable success both in the concert hall, as a leading modernist — he had been a pupil of Feruccio Busoni who pursued tonal innovations parallel to those of Schoenberg — and in the theatre, notably with operas based on the works of the leading expressionist playwright Georg Kaiser. The composer Paul Hindemith, one of the artistic directors of the Festival of Chamber Music at Baden-Baden wanted to commission Weill to write a short opera for the 1927 festival. Weill had no libretto, but he had been deeply impressed by Brecht’s first collection of poetry, the *Hauspostille (Domestic Breviary)*, which had recently been published. He approached Brecht for permission to use a sequence of five poems about a mythical wild west city, *Mahagonny*, as a basis for a composition. And so they had collaborated on the *Mahagonny Songspiel*, which later became a full-scale opera -- in 1930).

And, indeed, Weill’s music, which surely today carries most of *The Threepenny Opera*’s lasting appeal, owes its effectiveness to a very large extent to Brecht’s poetry. Brecht used language on the stage in a way he described as *gestural*. The language had, as it were, to force the actor into the right attitude, the right expressiveness, beyond mere gesture, an epitome of the total essence of the scene — what he called *Gestus*. And Weill developed this idea into a theory of *gestural* music. He wrote: “Music lacks the capacity to describe psychology or character. Instead music has an ability which is decisive for the presentation of human beings on the stage — it can reproduce the gesturality which can clarify what is going on on the stage, it can even create a kind of basic *gestus* by which it prescribes a certain attitude to the actor which excludes any chance of a misunderstanding about the action in question. It can, in the optimal case, so fix this *gestus* that a wrong representation of that action becomes impossible .... The music has the ability to so determine the basic gesturality of an event that any wrong interpretation can be avoided....”

In that sense Weill’s music embodies the spirit of Brecht’s poetry and carries it across the frontiers of language. It is this, I think, which makes for the continued attraction and power of *The Threepenny Opera* today. Almost casually, quite unforced, Brecht and Weill created a work that combines lightness of touch, lack of pretentiousness, multifaceted ironies and ambivalences with complex multilayered meaning.

A good deal of Brecht’s poetry is lost in translation — but Weill’s music captures the
essence of the power of its gestus. Moreover, the fact that an 18th century idea proved powerful in 1928 — shows its ability to transcend time in the present production which Carl Weber has set in England at the time of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, in 1953.

Italo Calvino once defined a classic as a work that “has never finished what it has to say.” In that sense the Threepenny Opera, it seems to me, is a true classic.

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THE BRECHT-AUDEN
DUCHESS OF MALFI:
A World Premiere in Los Angeles
Dorothea Kehler

Within two years of fleeing Europe for Los Angeles, Brecht became involved in an ill-starred project, “the most obscure collaboration of his American exile,” writes James K. Lyon (141). Brecht collaborated first with H. R. Hays, an American poet and one of his translators, then, on Brecht’s invitation, with Auden, who replaced Hays. Brecht had originally intended to adapt Thomas Heywood’s A Woman Killed with Kindness for the German actress Elisabeth Bergner, like him an emigre to the United States. But before tackling the Heywood play, Brecht decided, in its place, to revise John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi for Bergner. This project occupied him on and off from 1943 to 1946, generating three complete copyrighted adaptations as well as five complete or near-complete texts presently in the Brecht Archive, Berlin. Surprisingly, none of these works was ever staged.1 Following the 1945 London triumph of the original Webster Duchess directed by George Rylands and starring Peggy Ashcroft and John Gielgud, the adaptation was abandoned, and a near-facsimile of the Rylands production was brought to New York, where it did poorly; Brecht and Auden remained among the credits (presumably to capitalize on name recognition), until Brecht, who had considered suing for breach of contract, had his name withdrawn.2

Thus, the version director Denise Gillman produced for the Theatre of Note and her year-old Pilgrimage Theatre in the former’s modest Los Angeles venue was a world premiere. For the July 26 through September 5, 1998 run, Gillman chose the latest (1946) and most “Brechtian” text, not one of the known eight versions but a conflation reconstructed by A. R. Braunmuller of UCLA—a text available only in the Random House volume 7 edition of what is otherwise a Pantheon imprint of Brecht’s Collected Plays. As primary reviser, Brecht had hoped for productions modeled after blockbuster Broadway musicals, a genre he thought replete with surrealism alienation effects.3 Instead, the adaptation was staged as theatre-in-the-round, played by nine actors in a brick-walled space surrounded by some fifty seats, the only prop being an all-purpose black box. The success of the production despite minimal staging was a tribute to Director Gillman, who capitalized on the distinctively Brechtian slant of the adaptation: the prominence of social class as a determinant of action.

From the start the play engrossed an audience that, like most of the actors, seemed on average to be thirty-something. Gillman established a disquieting, sinister mood for the prologue, plunging the house into a darkness made audible by the sounds of wind and whispering—perhaps evoked by the lines “A visor and a mask are whispering rooms / That were never built for goodness” (Brecht 346-47).4 An explosion of light revealed an athletic, shaven-skulled Ferdinand in black Elizabethan costume, passionately confessing to the Friar his incestuous love for his sister, hoping against all reason for permission to act on his desire. The prologue, quite close in its language to act one, scene one, of John Ford’s Tis a Pity She’s a Whore, is changed somewhat to accommodate both Brecht’s streamlining of Webster and his increased development of Ferdinand’s wars. Frustrated by the Friar’s refusal, Ferdinand leaves to take command of troops in Cyprus, an echo of Othello, recalling another tortured love. By making Ferdinand’s chief motive explicit, Brecht forgoes ambiguity, preferring to underscore the decadence of the upper classes.