

wavering Little Monk. And L. Peter Callender (American Conservatory Theater's *Tartuffe*) brings the pragmatic Cardinal Barbarini to life.

Like the polymath Brecht, Wing-Davey has used every bit of inventive staging that designer Douglas Stein could devise: an elevator platform that rises to create a table or bench, or to lift a group of actors; video footage from an Italian TV game show; a disco ball; a border station with mechanical arms that raise and lower. Christopher Akerlind's versatile lighting design can highlight or obliterate a character, as needed. Meg Nelville's costumes conjure a timeless mood by mixing contemporary working-class duds with Vatican finery from the 1600s.

Rather than overwhelm the drama, the stagecraft and skillful acting make for thrilling theater. Brecht at times might be heavy-handed, but this production reminds us that he wrote timeless treasures, which will survive long after human genes have been completely mapped.

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## THREEPENNY OPERA IN SAN FRANCISCO

Robert Hurwitt

Bebe Neuwirth stands in a stark spotlight in front of the tawdry, frayed red curtain, her thin face framed in a thick black mane that cascades over her tail coat and slit red mini. She plants her stiletto-heeled feet and sheer-stockinged long legs well apart and simply, matter-of-factly launches into "Moritat," the justly famed "Ballad of Mack the Knife."

Her stunning voice — overmiked as it is — rings out clear, raw, insistent and penetrating with a feral vibrato that broadcasts the emotional resonance her formal stance and delivery belie. She sings Bertolt Brecht's sardonic catalogue of Macheath's career of rape, murder, robbery and mayhem investing every note of Kurt Weill's melody with perfect phrasing and rising, irresistible intensity.

By the time she's finished, you not only know Carey Perloff's ACT season opener is going to be a smash success, you understand all over again why *The Threepenny Opera* is the definitive musical



drama of the 20th century. And that's just the opening, before musical director Peter Maleitzke's hot onstage jazz sextet has swung into the overture. Two hours and 40 minutes later, as Neuwirth sings the bitterly downbeat coda, those feelings remain intact.

Not that *Threepenny* is foolproof. Brecht and Weill wrote their 1928 masterpiece specifically for singing actors rather than trained musical voices. But many a revival has foundered on inept musicianship, onstage or in the pit (the original featured the Lewis Ruth Band, one of Germany's top jazz groups) — if not on sloppy stagings, bad acting or misconceived direction.

Perloff's *Threepenny* which opened Wednesday, September 8, at the Geary Theatre, falls

into none of these traps. Michael Feingold's translation, revised from his 1989 Broadway version, is sharp, lucid and almost as biting as Brecht's German. The musicianship is brilliant on every hand. Perloff's staging is crisp, clear and brightly original.

And the cast she's assembled is quite simply the finest I've seen since the *Threepenny* that turned me into a lifelong theater devotee, the 1950s Off Broadway Theater de Lys production with which Lotte Lenya — Weill's widow and Brecht's original Jenny — helped revive Weill's reputation and re-establish the play as a contemporary classic.

It's a cast made up of equal parts Broadway veterans — Neuwirth, Philip Casnoff, Lisa

Vrohman, Nancy Dussault — ACT regulars (Steven Anthony Jones, Anika Noni Rose, Charles Lanyer, Dan Hiatt), other local actors and students from ACT's MFA and Young Conservatory programs.

Perloff weaves their talents into a seamless ensemble full of outstanding performances.

Not to mention a stunning blend of diverse, complementary performance styles: Neuwirth's confrontational Weimar cabaret stance; Dussault's deft vaudeville turns; Casnoff's disarming soft-shoe hooper grace; Vroman's operatic flourishes and silent-movie melodrama gestural eloquence; Rose's romantic ingenue underlaid with lusty burlesque. It's a range reflective of the eclectic sources for both the score and the script.

Weill matched Brecht's eclecticism with a score that blended American jazz and Lutheran hymns, German cabaret and English music hall, high and light opera and other influences, including one entire song from Gay — whose own score had been entirely composed of popular English tunes. It's a script and score that could make a post-modernist scholar dizzy analyzing layers of borrowing. But it takes no expertise whatsoever to revel in the play's still-astonishing freshness, bite and beauty.

Perloff, wisely, lets the play speak for itself, making only minor adjustments — far less radical than Brecht was wont to do with his own productions. True, she sticks Moritat out front, before the overture, and gives it to Jenny instead of the usual streetsinger. But Neuwirth, a memorable Velma in Broadway's recent *Chicago* (as well as *Cheers*), provides a blistering vivid rendition that fully justifies the change.

Feingold, theater critic for the *Village Voice*, has cut the text and songs some. But he's restored the songs to their original order and characters (though Perloff has Neuwirth's Jenny double gloriously with Rose's Polly Peachum on a resonant, searing "Pirate Jenny.")





Some of the translation undercut Brecht's humor, particularly in the rousing "Canon Song," but most capture the crisp clarity of Brecht's wit.

Perloff and choreographer Luis Perez infuse the show with a brisk, engaging energy that only flags a bit in the middle of the second act. Annie Smart's set — a two-story, distressed brick shell of an opera house, as if after an earthquake — and

turn-of-the-century costumes establish the vaguely San Francisco-ish milieu of Perloff's version.

The performers turn in one show-stopping rendition after another, giving the songs the intensified focus and self-conscious theatricality Brecht demanded. Dussault is outstanding as the tipsy, resourceful Mrs. Peachum, pairing brilliantly with Jones' gruff, booming, sanctimonious baritone on the Peachums' beggar shop duets. With resonant whiskey-tinged voice and deft sight gags, she turns the "Ballad of the Prisoner of Sex" into a hilarious solo turn of sardonic wit and delightful ribaldry. Vroman is outstanding as Lucy Brown both in a stunning vocal face-off "Jealousy Duet," with Rose's Polly and her superb, diabolically melodramatic "Lucy's Aria." Rose is sweetly touching and brightly lusty in her love duets with Casnoff and in her delightful "Barbara Song" about lost innocence. Above all, Neuwirth's Jenny and Casnoff's Machheath set the tone — she with her sharp, combative watchfulness, he with the murderous impulse not quite concealed beneath his song and dance grace. Neuwirth is as outstanding in her cynical "Solomon Song" as in the "Moritat" and "Pirate Jenny." Casnoff, too, sings beautifully, rendering Machheath's great paeans to corruption and soulful gallows hymns with dynamic intensity. And their tango duet ("Pimp's Ballad") is stunning in its erotic electricity and vicious execution. Its altogether a brilliant production.

As Neuwirth sings its acute final verses — about a society divided between those who walk in the light and "those in darkness lost to sight" — it's hard to leave the Geary without a deeper awareness of the social injustices so evident in the surrounding streets.

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