

The Threepenny Opera

A Musical Play

Book and lyrics by Bertolt Brecht
Music by Kurt Weill



Teacher`s Pack
The English Theatre Frankfurt
2011

1. The Author

Eugen Bertolt Friedrich Brecht (1898 - 1956)

Brecht was a poet, playwright, and theatre director. Born in Augsburg, Germany, he studied philosophy and medicine at the University of Munich before becoming a medical orderly in a German military



hospital during the First World War. This experience reinforced his hatred of war and influenced his support for the failed Socialist revolution in 1919. After the war Brecht returned to university but became more interested in literature - his first play to be produced was *Baal* in 1922.

Together with Kurt Weill he later wrote '*The Threepenny Opera*' (based on *The Beggar's Opera*). Brecht added his own lyrics which illustrated his growing belief in Marxism. He also attempted to develop a new approach to the theatre. He tried to persuade his audiences to see the stage as a stage, actors as actors and not to overlook the traditional make-believe of the theatre. Brecht required detachment, not passion, from the observing audience. The purpose of the play was to awaken the spectators' minds so

that he could communicate his version of the truth.

Brecht's plays reflected a Marxist interpretation of society and when Adolf Hitler gained power in 1933 he was forced to flee from Germany - living in Denmark, Sweden and the Soviet Union and finally the USA. While living in exile he wrote anti-Nazi plays such as '*The Roundheads and the Peakheads*' and '*Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*'. This was later followed by '*Galileo*', '*Mother Courage*', '*The Good Man of Szechuan*', '*The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*' and the '*Caucasian Chalk Circle*'.

In 1947 Brecht was named in the House of Un-American Activities Committee investigation. He denied being a member of the American Communist Party but soon after left the USA for East Germany. In 1949 Brecht founded the Berliner Ensemble (which became the country's most famous theatre company) with his wife and long-time collaborator, the actress Helene Weigel.

2. Composer Kurt Weill

Born in Germany, Weill studied at the Berlin University of the Arts. He fled Nazi Germany in 1933 and moved to the USA in 1935. He composed '*Mahagonny*', '*Lady in the Dark*', '*Street Scene*' and many other innovative works for the theatre. Weill's music continues to be performed both in popular and classical contexts.

"I think I've written a good piece and that several numbers in it, at least musically, have the best prospects for becoming popular very quickly." This was the assessment offered by the German composer Kurt Weill in a letter to his publisher 10 days before the premiere of his latest work. Brecht cobbled his lyrics from a deliberately awkward, arrhythmic and repetitious mix of Biblical quotations, tired clichés and street slang, and Weill's music draws upon and abruptly shifts among classics, popular dance tunes and jazz. Indeed, much of the work's energy derives from these constant multi-levelled tensions, thus perhaps symbolizing the Marxian principle so dear to Brecht of progress arising from a synthesis of opposites.



Created in partnership with the revolutionary dramatist Bertolt Brecht, that work would, in fact, prove to be the most significant and successful of Weill's career and one of the most important works in the history of musical theater: *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*). In addition to running for 400-plus performances in its original German production, Brecht and Weill's masterpiece would go on to be translated into 18 languages and receive more than 10,000 performances internationally.

The drama critic for *The New York Times* said of Weill in 1941, "He is not a song writer but a composer of organic music that can bind the separate elements of a production and turn the underlying motive into song." While this comment was intended as praise of Weill, who had by then fled his native Germany for the United States, it nevertheless sold Weill's songwriting somewhat short. By 1959, Weill's opening song from *The Threepenny Opera*, "The Ballad of Mackie Messer" would be one of the biggest pop hits of all time for Bobby Darin in a jazzy variation inspired by Louis Armstrong and renamed "Mack The Knife."

Much of *The Threepenny Opera's* historical reputation rests on Brecht's experimental dramaturgical techniques—such as breaking "the fourth wall" between audience and performers—but the music of Kurt Weill was just as important in turning it into a triumph.

Task 1:

Present your favourite "Threepenny Opera Song" in class. Comment on the character of the music. Compare with modern versions by Bobby Darin or The Doors. See

www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRGT Rvtq9HU / www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=564

3. The Play - Introduction

For anybody coming to **The Threepenny Opera** cold, its opening thirty minutes could be something of a culture shock. The viewer is thrust onto the cold streets of London like a new-born babe. Mackie appears, looking suave and dangerous. All we hear are songs, thrilling the nerves with. What we don't get is exposition, background and explanation; the characters live in this city, everything else has to be inferred. Given this challenge you can either sit back and be confused, or take an active part in harvesting any crumbs that drop from the table. Chart the latter course and a world of corruption, power, surprise and beauty is revealed.

"The Threepenny Opera" remains the most famous and popular example of what Brecht called "epic theatre." It received its world premiere in Berlin on Aug 31, 1928.

The premiere of *The Threepenny Opera* on this day in 1928 came almost exactly 200 years after the premiere of the work on which it was based: John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*. In Gay's satirical original, the thieves, pickpockets and prostitutes of London's Newgate Prison competed for power and position in the accents and manners of the English upper classes. It was Bertolt Brecht's idea to adapt *The Beggar's*

Opera into a new work that would serve as a sharp political critique of capitalism and as a showcase for his avant-garde approach to theater.

Inspired by John Gay's rollicking "Beggar's Opera" (1728), "Threepenny" translated the tale of the villainous but irresistible Macheath and his marauders into the age of Queen Victoria. But the show's real satiric targets were the middle classes of poverty-crippled, rudderless Germany in the 1920's. It was an immediate scandalous hit all over Europe.

Using deliberately artificial techniques — painted signs, scene-setting titles, spoken asides and musical-hall songs that often had little to do with the immediate plot — the play was designed to sustain an intellectual distance, to allow audiences to see their own reflections in vicious thugs, whores, beggars and policemen motivated by the same primal needs and instincts as themselves. **Epic theatre** earned its name by using clear description, a reporting style, choruses and projections and asides as a means of communicating with audiences. It renounced the romanticism of earlier theatre and presented characters who represented different sides of an argument. The audience was invited to draw its own conclusions about the situations presented in a more detached “scientific” way – an approach fully developed in the mid 20th century by noted German playwright, Bertolt Brecht. He called the scientific approach the “alienation effect”. He used unrealistic sets and comedy to soften the harsh realities of events presented in the plays.

Task 2:

Can you detect any features of Brecht's approach to the theatre in the ETF production of the “Threepenny Opera”? Give examples for anti-illusion in reference to the set, the style of acting, the presentation of characters!

The music, Brecht wrote, was meant to become "an active collaborator in the stripping bare of the middle-class corpus of ideas."

Ever since, *The Threepenny Opera* has been something of an embarrassment to hardcore Marxist interpreters of Brecht. Its greatest fans were the bourgeoisie whom it supposedly attacked: they liked nothing better than having their greed, hypocrisy and amorality so entertainingly exposed, and no one could demonstrate that they were any the better for it. Yet Brecht never disowned it; rather, he remained somewhat obsessed with it, continually fiddling with the text and even writing a film version.

3. Director`s Notes

A. History

In 1927 Brecht wanted to write a play about sex and money, and the corruption of human nature that can stem from them both. He wanted it to be provoking, morally educational as well as richly entertaining; one in the eye for a complacent and fashionable Berlin audience, - an audience more used to the lavish operatic stage, gorgeous romantic musicals and spectacularly mounted classics. But not an ignorant audience. Culturally, Berlin between the wars was enormously sophisticated and well informed. They knew the theatre tradition that Brecht would draw from if he turned an existing play in to something else for their entertainment. In taking John Gay's 'The Beggar's Opera' Brecht had motives other than cultural allusion. He believed that in order to keep art contemporary we should not revere its past, but deliberately rework its all too familiar plots and famous scenes into something strikingly new. He had already recycled Marlowe's 'Edward II' and would soon turn to Shakespeare's 'Coriolanus' and Webster's 'The Duchess of Malfi'.

With surprisingly few changes in its structure 'The Beggar's Opera' became 'The Threepenny Opera'. Brecht and John Gay did share similar intentions, however. Gay had written a conscious piece of political satire for a London audience overfed on ornate, Italianate Handelian opera. His Macheath was a portrait of the Prime Minister of the day, Sir Robert Walpole. His audience little expected to see an opera set in a prison instead of on Mount Olympus; and to hear familiar street songs from the untrained voices of actors. The combination proved devastating and 'The Beggar's Opera' was a sensation.

Brecht wanted the same mix; politics and music, - the one harshly critical of bourgeois values; the other seductive, rhythmical and lyrical by turns, irresistible to its audience, thus making the desired chemical reaction of content, form and spectator complete. In 1928, at the first performance, Brecht hoped to spring his trap. But he had not bargained for the immensity of his audience's sophistication, the breadth of their decadence. In furs and diamonds they revelled in its perversity, applauded its innovation as nothing more than chic, went home humming its tunes, - and missed the point. Kurt Weill's music became wildly popular as something divorced from the play; a jazzy film version was planned, - Brecht sued, settled out of court and washed his hands of the finished movie. Not until he founded his own actors company, The Berliner Ensemble, in 1949 was the play performed with anything like the author's intended effect.

B. Our approach

We not only start with a bare stage, we try to look at the story with rather naïve eyes ignoring all beaten-track alleys and trivial political messages.

On the surface we see a struggle for power between Peachum and Macheath, the reckless king of crime. Peachum doesn't want to lose his daughter Polly trying to protect his beggar's business against Macheath; that is why he wants to enforce his arrest, therefore why he blackmails Tiger Brown, the chief of the London police.

But our main focus is on Polly, who, still almost a child, suddenly seems to turn into a ruthless business-woman. But inside she is a lost meandering soul in between brutal male greed, oppressing parents, jealous and mischievous female rivals (Jenny, Lucy).

The parents pretend having an educational philosophy, but they can barely hide their selfish interests.

Kids today, kids today
Never give a monkey what their parents say
They prefer love, they prefer love
Busy misbehaving stead of saving for a rainy day

They love the Moon over Soho
They go for that tacky “this is my heart beating” stuff
They fall for that “I will be yours for eternity” bollocks

Task 3:

Find out more about the production history of the play

See: www.threepennyopera.org/intro.php

A complete guide to The **Threepenny Opera**, with background information, history, synopsis, audio files, and more!

(Sponsored by the **Kurt Weill Foundation**)

What did you find interesting?
Exchange your discoveries with your classmates!

And a good honest job isn't good enough

For her father Polly has to be an obedient tool, for mother she is like a puppet dressed up for different roles and jobs.

PEACHUM: It's quite simple. You're married. What does a girl do when she's married? Use your head. Well, she gets divorced, see. Is that so hard to figure out?

POLLY: I don't know what you're talking about.

MRS PEACHUM: Divorce.

POLLY: But I love him. How can I think of divorce?

MRS PEACHUM: Really, have you no shame?

POLLY: Mother, if you've ever been in love ...

MRS PEACHUM: In love! Those damn books you've been reading have turned your head. Why, Polly, everybody's doing it.

POLLY: Then I'm an exception.

MRS PEACHUM: Then I'm going to tan your behind, you exception.

POLLY: Oh yes, all mothers do that, but it doesn't help because love goes deeper than a tanned behind.

Having gone through the ordeal of a disappointed romantic love and having tried out different forms of identity, Polly has been initiated into a weird society at the price of losing her ideals and orientation.



Task 4:

1. Tell the story of the „Threepenny Opera” from Polly`s point of view as you see it presented in the ETF production. Mind: props, movements, songs and facial expressions!
2. The play is originally set in Victorian London. Which references to the current political situation in England can you discover in the production?

4. Musical numbers

The Flick Knife Song

1. Though the shark’s teeth can be lethal
You can see them white and red
But you won’t see Mackies’ flick knife
Once he’s slashed you
then you’re dead

2. On a sunny Sunday morning
there’s a dead man on the street
while a live one turns the corner
Mack the Knife’s still on his feet.

3. Millionaires keep disappearing
Meyer Goldberg’s gone away.
Mack The Knife spends Meyer’s gold now;
How he got it we can’t say.

4. Little Jamie was abducted
And they sought him high and low
Though his parents paid the ransom
Mackie’d slashed him weeks ago

5. What about that fire in Soho?
Seven kids died in the smoke.
Mack the Knife stands in the crowd and laughs
No one asks him: “What’s the joke?”

6. There’s a schoolgirl, who’s a call-girl
With a baby at her breast
Someone robbed her, someone raped her
Someone’s flick knife did the rest.

Mac:

7. These may seem like scary stories
But don’t have nightmares or be upset,
I am evil, I’m a murd’rer
And they haven’t caught me yet



Task 5:

Compare different versions and recordings of this song.

See:

<http://www.threepennyopera.org/mediaMackKnife.php>

THE BALLAD OF SEXUAL OBSESSION



Mrs. Peachum

1. Observe Macheath, the lethal kind of charmer
You wouldn't think a chink was in his armour
A man who needs a sea of sin to swim in
And guess what always drags him under ... women
With them he can't control himself you see –
A pris'ner of his sexuality.

He`s never read the bible
Thinks the law`s a joke
His ego is the one god he adores
He calls his every move a master stroke
He has no time to waste on whores
From nine to five he`s always up and doing
But come the night
He`s down in some whole screwing.

Jenny 1+2.

2. So many men have watched their smarter brother wreck his bright future
For some slit or other
And they'll swear up and down it`s sordid
Who got him in that hole?
The no good whore did.
With her he can't control himself you see
A pris'ner of his sexuality.
So one man thumps the bible
One clings to the law
One throws a bomb another sings a hymn
At lunch they never eat their oysters raw, all afternoon they work out at the gym.

The sunset from the heights you`ll find them viewing
But comes the night, they`re down in some hole screwing.



Look at Macheath who`s starting to perspire.
He`s hung low now, but soon they`ll hang him higher.
His life hangs by a thread, he can`t be choosy
And what`s the boy got in his head? Some floozy.
In the noose he won`t control himself you`ll see –
A pris`ner of his sexuality.
He realizes now that he`s been sold for cash;
And saw her take it with a smiling face?
And so at last he learns he`s been too rash:
That woman`s hole was his last resting place.
Now let him curse and rage; for all his plotting,
Before tonight, he`ll be in some hole rotting.

2. THREEPENNY FINALE

Macheath:

1. We listen to the sentimental preachers
Who try to teach the world a better way
But they forget that men are hungry creatures
First give us breakfast, then we`ll start the day!

They all imagine peace and plenty elsewhere
Contentment from the cradle to the grave
It`s a Utopia and one we`d love to share
But you must feed us, then we`ll all behave

These moral absolutes are hard to follow
Just give us something tangible to swallow

“But What keeps a Man alive? “

Choir:

What keeps a Man alive? It’s his compulsion
To steal and cheat an kick his fellow man in the face
We have to eat the shit without revulsion
And turn our back upon the human race
You have to be a sinner to survive
It’s wickedness that keeps a man alive.

Mrs Peachum

2. They tell us not to do it in a doorway
And when an act of love’s an act of sin
We’ll change our lives, we’d love to do it your way!
Just give breakfast, then we’ll begin ...

You’re either in the kitchen or the alleyway
And either way they treat you like a slave
Are you surprised we like it when we pay
First you must feed us then we’ll all behave

These moral absolutes are hard to follow
Just give us something tangible to swallow

“But What keeps a Man alive? “

What keeps a Man alive? It’s his compulsion
To steal and cheat an kick his fellow man in the face
We have to eat the shit without revulsion
And turn our back upon the human race
You have to be a sinner to survive
It’s wickedness that keeps a man alive.

3. Threepenny Finale

! Although it’s turned out happy in the end
Not all the poor receive a royal pardon
You can see for yourself as you stroll through Covent Garden

Perhaps you’d do the actors all a favour,
Allow us to sing a song for the Homeless.
After all, they’ve allowed us to make a play for there lives.
Happy endings only really happen on stage,
And people are saved from poverty only rarely ...
And day by day they have to scrape a living

Task 6:

- a. Read the original German songtexts. Compare with the English translations.
- b. Discuss the contents of the songs in class. Which human attitudes are portrayed and criticized?

That is why, if they should stray, we should try to be forgiving.

We do implore, don't judge the poor too harshly
They turn to crime whenever times are tough
For life today is cold and grey and ghastly
And living it is punishment enough.

5. Glossary

A. Lyrics

Kids Today

tacky – cheap, badly made

eternity bollocks – rubbish, shit about eternal love (blödsinniges Geschwafel über die ewige Liebe)

Ballad of Sexual Obsession

*a chink in sb`s. armour- a weakness
in sb`s character*

*floozy – a woman having sexual
relationships with a lot of men*

choosy – wählerisch

lethal – deadly

sordid – very dirty, unpleasant

to screw – to fuck

Finales

invidious – unpleasant

life`s a bitch – bad things happen in life

hideous – häßlich

laudable ambition -lobenswerter Vorsatz

Pirate Jenny

skivvy - slave

to shell a town – eine Stadt beschießen

pittance – very small amount of money, wages



Song of Futility

vale of tears – Tal der Tränen

times are out of joint – die Zeit ist aus den Fugen

reprobates and skivers – Drückeberger und Schulschwänzer

Cannon Song

Basra / Goose Green – British theatres of war in Iraque and the Falklands Islands

squaddies – British soldiers

coroner – Leichenbestatter

Socrates Song

swings and roundabouts – Schaukeln und Karussells

honeycombed with doubts – durchsetzt von Zweifeln

ingeniuty is no use – Genialität nützt nichts

to deify s.o. – jmd. vergöttern

B. Script

splendor – Pracht

law-abiding people – gesetzestreue Menschen

a derelict on high seas- ein Schiffbrüchiger auf See

impudence - Frechheit

to molest passers-by – Fußgänger belästigen

a prey to my baser instincts – ein Opfer meiner niederen Triebe

to stuff one`s belly – sich den Bauch vollschlagen, fressen

penurious – very poor

abode - Zuhause

splendiferous – großartig, glänzend

do I have a record at Scotland Yard – liegt etwas gegen mich vor bei S.Y.

arson – Brandstiftung

forgery – Betrug

perjury – Meineid

to seduce – verführen

share certificates – Aktien

to dangle from the gallow tree – am Galgen baumeln

blackmail – Erpressung

fair verdict – gerechtes Urteil

to nab s.o. – to catch and arrest him

a ledger – book with business records

60 th anniversary of the Coronation /Coronation Jubilee (Feierlichkeiten zum 60. Jahrestag der Krönung von Queen Elizabeth II)

from the cradle to the grave – von der Wiege bis zum Grab

to have a sticky time – in Schwierigkeiten kommen

invariably – always

to trip over a threshold – über eine Schwelle stolpern

a tart – eine Hure

slut – Schlampe

to raise money - Geld aufbringen

shut your trap – halt die Klappe

hideously unjust – schrecklich ungerecht

sicked-up milk – saure Milch

soused herrings – eingelegte Heringe

to be fit to black s.o. boots – jmd. die Schuhe putzen dürfen

If you wish to receive more song texts/lyrics or the complete production script for tuition purposes, send an Email to: michael.gonszar@english-theatre.org.

