

THE

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**BY BERTOLT BRECHT (TEXT)
AND KURT WEILL (MUSIC)
IN COLLABORATION WITH
ELISABETH HAUPTMANN**

**PENNY
OPERA**

**BERLINER
ENSEMBLE**



DIE DREIGROSCHENOPER

based on John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*
by Bertolt Brecht (Text) and Kurt Weill (Music)
in Collaboration with Elisabeth Hauptmann

JONATHAN JEREMIAH PEACHUM Tilo Nest
and CELIA PEACHUM, Constanze Becker / Pauline Knof
owners of the company
“The Beggar's Friend Ltd”

POLLY PEACHUM, Cynthia Micas
their daughter

MACHEATH, known as MACKIE MESSER, Nico Holonics / Gabriel Schneider
boss of a gang of street bandits

BROWN, Kathrin Wehlisch
chief of police London

LUCY, Laura Balzer / Amelie Willberg
his daughter

SPELUNKENJENNY, Bettina Hoppe / Sonja Beißwenger
prostitute

FILCH, Nico Holonics / Gabriel Schneider
one of Peachum's beggars

**MACHEATHS MEN,
STREET BANDITS**
as well as

HUREN Julia Berger, Julie Wolff /
Katharina Beatrice Hierl, Teresa Scherhag

Dennis Jankowiak, Nicky Wuchinger /
Denis Riffel, Timo Stacey

SMITH, Dennis Jankowiak, Nicky Wuchinger /
first constable Denis Riffel, Timo Stacey

THE MOON OVER SOHO Josefin Platt
and its double Heidrun Schug

ORCHESTRA

CONDUCTOR, PIANO, HARMONIUM Adam Benzwi / Levi Hammer
ALTO SAXOPHONE, CLARINET, FLUTE, James Scannell /
PICCOLO Karola Elßner, Jonas Schön
SOPRANO SAXOPHONE, TENOR SAXOPHONE, Doris Decker /
BARITONE SAXOPHONE Jonas Schön, Annegret Tully
TRUMPET Nathan Plante /
Alan Mifsud Sommer, Michael Stodd
TROMBONE, DOUBLE BASS Otwin Zipp / Marcus Voges
DRUMS Stephan Genze /
Sebastian Trimolt, Christoph Grahl
GUITAR, BANJO Ralf Templin /
Greg Dinunzi, Benjamin Schwenen

DIRECTOR Barrie Kosky
MUSICAL DIRECTOR Adam Benzwi
STAGE DESIGN Rebecca Ringst
COSTUMES Dinah Ehm
LIGHTING DESIGN Ulrich Eh
SOUND DESIGN Holger Schwark
DRAMATURGY Sibylle Baschung

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR Leonie Rebentisch, Dennis Nolden **ASSISTANT MUSICAL DIRECTOR**
Levi Hammer, Daniel Busch **ASSISTANT STAGE DESIGNER** Annett Hunger, Janina
Kuhlmann **ASSISTANT COSTUME DESIGNER** Svenja Niehaus **PROMPTER** Manuela
Gutsmann, Christine Schönfeld **STAGE MANAGER** Frank Sellentin **STAGE TECHNICIANS**
Mirko Baars, Benedikt Schröter **SOUND** Thorsten Hoppe, Afrim Parduzi
ACOUSTIC DESIGN Ralf Bauer-Diefenbach **LIGHTING** Sebastian Scheinig **PROPS**
Timothy Hopfner, Anke Tekath **MAKEUP** Nana Gagel, Lena Hille, Friederike Reichel
WARDROBE Britta Klein, Marija Obradovic, Alexander Zapp

Technical Director: Stephan Besson. Technical Production: Edmund Stier. Head
of Lighting: Hans Fründt. Head of Sound: Jonas Emanuel Hagen. Head of Video:
Susanne Oeser. Head of Costume: Elina Schnizler. Wardrobe Mistresses: Uta Rosi,
Anja -Sonnen. Head of Props: Matthias Franzke. Head of Make-Up: Verena Martin.
Management of Extras: Peter Luppä.

The costumes were made in the Berliner Ensemble workshops.

THE PREMIERE WAS ON THE 13TH OF AUGUST, 2021
AT THE BERLINER ENSEMBLE
DURATION OF PERFORMANCE: 2 HOURS 50 MINUTES, ONE INTERVAL

“WE WOULD BE GOOD, INSTEAD OF BASE, BUT THIS OLD WORLD IS NOT THAT KIND OF PLACE!”

AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY BY SIBYLLE BASCHUNG

The discussion about what *The Threepenny Opera* is seems about as old as *The Threepenny Opera* itself: a play with music or a musical piece with a few bits of dialogue? In the programme for the world premiere at the Berliner Ensemble in 1928, the play is given the following subtitle: a play based on *The Beggar's Opera*, a ballad opera from 1729 by John Gay. Elisabeth Hauptmann discovered the original, suggested it to Brecht, translated it and worked together with him on the script. Brecht himself was only listed in second position under “adapted by”, followed by “music: Kurt Weill”. And it was Lion Feuchtwanger who came up with the title. Thus, many people had their hand in helping to create this surprise theatrical coup, which achieved worldwide fame almost overnight – not least the actors. The door to *The Threepenny Opera's* journey all over the world was opened by the fantastic music by Kurt Weill and the superficially trivial story of love, betrayal, morality and business – and of course the cleverly subversive, socially critical adaptation by Brecht.

Brecht gave the original by John Gay its very own, new character and in doing so wrote a completely different play. The Brecht researcher Werner Hecht sums up the difference succinctly by saying that *The Beggar's Opera* of 1728 was a “disguised critique of open social problems,” while *The Threepenny Opera* of 1928 was an “open critique of disguised social problems.”



There is no real criminal milieu at the centre of *The Threepenny Opera*, but rather a “normal, bourgeois, capitalist” way of life (Erich Engel). For some members of society, this fulfils its promise of prosperity to a certain degree, while at the same time trying to mask the antisocial parts of this way of working and living with feigned sophistication and false theatrics. The play depicts characters who are first and foremost interested in their own, mainly material advantage – and have to be, because they live in a cold, alienated world. It requires a considerable theatrical effort to pursue their interests, while at the same time disguising or glossing over exactly that. After all: who doesn’t want to be good? However, in Brecht it is not an individual lack of virtue that causes social injustices, rather it is the other way round. The idea that they should therefore work together to change social circumstances does not occur to the characters. They are much too busy putting on a performance for others and themselves. Thus they themselves keep contributing to their own alienation and to a world where everything, including feelings and ultimately also art, become a commodity.

Weill, like many other young composers at the time, was opposed to Richard Wagner’s music and its narcotic, opiate effect, which Weill countered with the rhythm of the big city. Just as Brecht did on a literary level, Weill played with different musical genres from completely different contexts – ranging from influences from Jewish synagogue music to Bach, Mozart and operetta, jazz and popular dance music – and thus created something completely idiosyncratic and new

A MISUNDERSTANDING?

To Brecht’s disappointment, the audience at the world premiere left the theatre apparently rather less educated in matters of social

criticism, and instead very well entertained. The reason for this, in his opinion, was the music. This is an argument first put forward by Adorno in 1929, according to which *The Threepenny Opera*’s success was due to a misunderstanding on the part of the audience. The play should therefore be protected from its own success. Adorno’s defence of it, however, was not due to the obvious social criticism. The audience quickly understood that social circumstances were generally bad as they watched the play. His defence of it was rather due to the subversive, critical potential that was bubbling under its glamorous surface. Both in the text and in the music: in the compositional surface of the magnificent opera and operetta form, the composer Kurt Weill skilfully allows the disconnectedness, the meaninglessness of worn-out soundscapes and worlds of imagination to shine through. On the level of the characters, Weill thus manages to capture both the unfulfilled need for security and intimacy, and their failure due to a world full of façade and the false consciousness in which this reliability is sought.

Brecht’s work on *The Threepenny Opera* did not end with the world premiere in 1928. The play was published in January 1932 with some additions to the text and notes. The present version of the play keeps most of Brecht’s additions. Musically, it is based on the score from 1928 and also includes *Arie der Lucy (Lucy’s Aria)*, which was cut for the world premiere and *Ballade von der sexuellen Hörigkeit (Ballad of Sexual Dependency)*, which was only reintroduced in 1932, so that Weill’s composition can be heard in its entirety.

FALSE APPEARANCES

In *The Threepenny Opera*’s world, values such as compassion, loyalty, charity and the importance of family apply on the surface, yet hidden behind the operetta humour there is a machinery at



work that proves to be deeply antisocial to its core. The contradiction between the need to be good and be loved and asocial behaviour is rooted in the socio-political conditions that Peachum expresses with his famous words: “We would be good, instead of base, but this old world is not that kind of place!” “My position in the world is one of self-defence” is therefore the principle Peachum uses to justify his immoral actions.

The fear of financial ruin is always lurking within the system and although anyone who is wealthy enough lives a comfortable life, they are still a long way from being good – and individual goodness is also no guarantee of social conditions that could be viewed as fair in terms of the distribution of rights, opportunities and resources.

Neither Macheath, who almost falls prey to Peachum’s perfidious life-and-death scheme, nor anyone else in the play comes to the conclusion suggested by these facts, namely that the underlying social conditions need to be changed, instead they serve to justify the way things are. “The world is poor and men are bad, there is of course no more to add!” The actual crime, according to Brecht, is inherent to this view of the world.

POLLY: “BUT LOVE IS THE GREATEST THING IN THE WORLD”

Love for Sale is the name of a famous jazz standard by Cole Porter and the first working assumption that director Barrie Kosky used to approach *The Threepenny Opera*. The title plays with the agreement that is made in prostitution and other theatres of emotion, is acted out on stage and sometimes in life, that what is taking place is an illusion that tries to make us forget it is one.

Polly vehemently claims to oppose her parents’ economic thinking with something different – love. She pursues the idea of

the romantic relationship between two people as if it were unquestionable. Such a relationship lives off the promise of mending the cracks that the brutal conditions tear in the social fabric. At the same time it also linked to claims to possession. It only takes five days after they first meet before Mac and Polly celebrate their wedding, the “most beautiful day of their lives”, knowing full well what practical self-interests also played a role in this decision. In the eyes of the city, it is “the boldest move” that Macheath has made in his competition with Peachum’s empire to date. And by marrying her father’s biggest competitor, Polly can free herself from her dependency on her family. Not only Polly, but all of the other characters in Brecht become calculable objects and also behave that way – calculatingly. “All the fuss of tearfulness, emotion, eroticism and mood ultimately serves only to veil this fact” (Jan Knopf), no matter how seriously the desire for social warmth is meant. While the first two acts of the play are mainly focused on the hasty marriage of Polly and Macheath, on real and feigned feelings, on competition and Peachum’s murderous plot, accounts are settled in the last third of the play: relationships turn out to be unreliable as soon as the market value of one of the parties involved drops. In this sense, *The Threepenny Opera* shows the “thorough capitalisation of all human relationships,” as the director of the world premiere, Erich Engel, summarised the essence of the play.

MACHEATH: “NOW HEAR THE VOICE WHICH CRIES OUT FOR PITY”

What role does compassion play in this distorting mirror of total capitalism? It has two faces, like most things in Brecht. Thus *The Threepenny Opera* on the one hand puts an anachronistic figure of nineteenth-century capitalism on the stage in the character of the

businessman Peachum, making it literally look old. On the other hand, its portrayal of capitalism is modern and exemplary in terms of its elaborately styled facades. It shows us the characters’ ability to theatrically perform themselves, which allows them to exploit the other characters’ outdated patterns of emotion. When at the beginning Peachum explains how he uses theatrical means in a precisely calculated way in his factory of lies to generate pity in people in order to run a successful business, he is not only revealing the business secrets of his company “The Beggar’s Friend”, but also the structuring principle of the play itself. Ultimately one of the questions this begs is: to what extent do pity and charity lead to the reduction of structural injustices and suffering and to what extent do they maintain them? Is pity the essential prerequisite to fighting injustice? And in the case of Macheath, where is the injustice in the end? Not only is Macheath saved from the death penalty, he is also awarded privileges that enable him to live a bourgeois life and pursue a profitable business as a respected banker. Business that merely supports a different form of exploitation than the crimes Macheath was committing before. The injustice continues and is merely dressed in a façade of pity. Behind this lies a narcissistic identification with a form of violence that views the world as its property and at the same time demands love. Macheath celebrates his salvation and with good reason presents himself as the victim of Peachum’s perfidious scheme, while at the same time is hatching new plans for how he can exploit his success as the public’s darling, in order to make even more money at the expense of others. This emotional game, as Brecht and Weill make us experience viscerally in the theatre, makes objectively examining and fighting social injustices impossible. Or have you not thoroughly enjoyed yourself? •

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TEXT CREDIT

The introductory essay by Sibylle Baschung was first published for the premiere of the *Dreigroschenoper* at the Berliner Ensemble (13th January 2021). The text has been shortened and edited for this programme.

IMAGE CREDITS

P. 2/3: Bettina Hoppe, Pauline Knof / P. 7: Gabriel Schneider / P. 10: Kathrin Wehlisch, Tilo Nest; Nico Holonics, Constanze Becker
P. 15: Adam Benzwi, James Scannell, Nico Holonics, Cynthia Micas



When Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble moved into the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in 1954, Brecht crossed out the eagle in the Prussian coat of arms above the imperial box with red paint during his very first inspection of the stage. The gesture was equally defiant and preservative, demonstrating that a danger must be recognised in order to counteract it.

#Bedreigroschenoper

IMPRESSUM

PUBLISHED BY

Berliner Ensemble GmbH

THEATRE SEASON

2021/22 · #107

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PRINTED BY

Druckhaus Sportflieger, Berlin

Berliner Ensemble GmbH / Geschäftsführer:
Oliver Reese, Jan Fischer / HRB-Nr.: 45435
beim Amtsgericht Berlin Charlottenburg /
UST-IdNr. DE 15555488

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BARRIE KOSKY, born in Melbourne in 1967, was artistic director and head director of the Komische Oper Berlin for ten years from the 2012/13 season onwards. Kosky is one of the most sought-after opera directors in the world; his work has taken him to stages and festivals such as the Bavarian State Opera, the Glyndebourne Festival, the Frankfurt Opera, the Zurich Opera House, the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden and the Bayreuth Festival. At the Berliner Ensemble, his interpretation of *The Threepenny Opera* is the fourth new production of the play at the theatre where it premiered almost one hundred years ago.

ADAM BENZWI, grew up in California, where he began his professional career as a 12-year-old cocktail pianist. He attended Stanford University in Berlin and made his debut at the Komische Oper Berlin in 2013, as music director of Paul Abraham's *Ball im Savoy*, followed by Barrie Kosky's *All Singing, All Dancing Yiddish Revue* among others, most recently the musical *Chicago*. His current projects at Berliner Ensemble include creating *Ich hab die Nacht geträumt* with the theatre and opera director Andrea Breth and *Fremder als der Mond*, a musical and fragmentary portrait of the life of Bertolt Brecht, directed by Oliver Reese.

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