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Publication Date

2011

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Die Dreigroschenoper
(The Threepenny Opera):
An Epic Collaboration

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Directing)

by

Jeffrey Wienckowski

Committee in charge:

Professor Gabor Tompa, Chair
Professor James Carmody
Professor Manuel Rotenberg
Professor Kim Rubinstein

2011

The thesis of Jeffrey Wienckowski is approved in quality and form
for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2011

DEDICATION

Edward Gordon Craig said that we do theatre because “we want to fly.” I would like to dedicate this work to Heidi Wienckowski, my beautiful, loving wife who inspired me to have enough faith in myself to spread my wings and gave me the loving encouragement to take flight.

EPIGRAPH

How long do works endure? As long as they are not completed.

Bertolt Bercht.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the professors that have left an indelible mark on my artistic life:

Gabor Tompa, Kim Rubinstein, Jim Carmody, Dominique Serrand and Les Waters.

Without their guidance, inspiration and passion, I would not be the artist I am today

My thesis production was an enormous educational experience and I am grateful to

everyone who helped make it possible: **Linda Vickerman, Eva Barnes and Mark**

Danisovszky.

I would also like to thank those colleagues who were always there for me: **Naysan**

Mojgani, Ian Wallace, Colin McGurk, Evangeline Whitlock and Tom Dugdale.

Finally, I must thank my parents, **George and Angela Wienckowski**, who never stopped believing in me. Thank you for your endless love and support.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Die Dreigroschenoper
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by

Jeffrey Wienckowski

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Directing)

University of California, San Diego, 2011

Professor Gabor Tompa, Chair

The last full production I directed before coming to Graduate School was Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children*. At the time, I paid little attention to Brecht's theories about Epic Theatre and staged the play "on my terms". Little by little, it overwhelmed me and slipped from my grasp. It was my biggest artistic failure, making me seriously question my abilities as an artist.

While my time at UCSD helped me regain my confidence and hone new artistic skills, the thought of revisiting Brecht was a daunting one. The thing I learned about tackling Brecht is that you cannot deal with him as just the playwright. You must also acknowledge "Brecht the Director" and invite him into your process.

Inviting a figure as opinionated as Mr. Brecht into your rehearsal room is always challenging. He and I had our share of disagreements; the staging of some songs or the direction in which I guided a performance or two. Nonetheless, having spent a great deal of preproduction with Brecht's notes, I was hyper-aware of any decisions that

contradicted his theories and never made them lightly. It was important for me to try and discover a “Verfremdungseffekt for 21st century America.” I arduously labored over each decision, looking for the choice that would most illuminate the spirit of Brecht, if not always his dogma.

My collaboration with Bertolt Brecht was an invaluable one, as it revealed to me the limitless artistic potential you can achieve when you commune with giants.

DIRECTOR'S CONCEPT

In my original proposal for *The Threepenny Opera*, I talked about doing the show as a small, one room “Trunk Show” style musical with only one piano. The original idea was for the play to take place in a morgue filled with lifeless bodies of vagrants, junkies and hookers. As Mr. Peachum then enters with his “Morning Anthem,” the corpses begin to arise and create the space with objects and set pieces that are stored in the drawers. While a lot of these details would change, this was a crucial starting point for what the production ultimately became.

As soon as the faculty approved the proposal, I began my in-depth research by studying Georio Strehler's 1954 production, as it was one of the few major productions Bertolt Brecht had a direct hand in developing. Feeling that the Milan audience could not relate to the Victorian setting, Strehler and Brecht wanted to find an “Analogue” time and place that would parallel both the era written about in the text and 1950s Milan. For Strehler, the analogue was 1911 New York, with its influx of Italian immigrants.

Like Strehler, I felt that modern audiences have no connection with Victorian England and decided to find my own analogue. I wanted my production to be quintessentially American and felt it was very important to find a setting that was so deeply rooted in America's bones that it would still resonate with modern audiences. For me, the decision to set *Threepenny Opera* during the Great Depression was an easy one. Our country is currently struggling with one of the greatest financial crisis since that era, making the Depression parallel timely and significant.

The action of *Threepenny* takes place around the coronation of Queen Victoria. This got me thinking of coronations and inaugurations; moments in history that are filled with the hope and promise of great social change. The coronation of Victoria must have been surrounded with the same optimism as the 1932 inauguration of Franklin Roosevelt or Barack Obama's 2009 inauguration. Unfortunately, hope quickly fades and politics always breaks your heart.

Just as Brecht writes that Queen Victoria's first official act is to reprieve Macheath, President Obama approved a multi-billion dollar bank bail-out, letting the real-world Macheaths go free with nothing more than a slap on the wrist. I decided to model our Macheath after Al Capone; a brutal gangster who always saw himself as a "legitimate business man," but I was also conscious to parallel Mack with today's gangsters (the Bernie Madoffs, Jeffery Skillings and Lehman Brothers) who have risen to the surface of "legitimate business". The Peachums were modeled after the Hoovers, Bushs and Boehners of the world; the shrewd politician who uses folksy wisdom and the fear of God to create and exploit poverty.

I wanted to add a prologue during the Overture that would use projections showing images of today's criminals and then slowly work our way backwards in time, until we see their pioneer: Al Capone. Scenic and projections designer Ian Wallace came up with the brilliant idea of animating red shark-heads on top of each image, neatly tying them to Macheath. "Oh, the shark has pretty teeth!"

I was very fortunate to have Mark Danisovszky as my musical director. He and I both agreed that what sets *Threepenny* apart from the typical Broadway musical is

Weill's jagged, angular music and the oddly unpleasant lyric phrasings of Bertolt Brecht. It was never our intention to make the music or the vocals sound "beautiful". Mark and I constantly pushed clarity of message and musical precision. Often times we would tell the actors, "The singing is too pretty. Let us hear the ideas." Mark's primary concern was keeping the integrity of Kurt Weill's score. This led us to the elegant solution of a two piano arrangement, using the second set of keys to fill in the rest of the orchestration.

Politics aside, a large part of what Brecht and Weill were doing when they originally wrote *The Threepenny Opera* was satirizing the great traditions of European opera. In striving to make the production truly American, I wanted to create a satire on the American Musical form. Everyone from George M. Cohen to Stephen Sondheim had stolen from Brecht and Weill throughout the years and I thought it was only fitting to use Brecht and Weill to skewer them.

Lighting and sound were used to playfully deride the standard conventions of the genre. When the actors started singing, we were all of a sudden transported into a highly-stylized "Musical Theatre" world. Even though the musical sequences seemed to be born out of the situation of the scene, we tried to always keep it skewed enough that the transitions were intentionally abrupt, jarring and disarming. It was also important for me to find moments where the stage action would deliberately contradict the lyrics, the musical tone or both.

While I was using the Great Depression as an intellectual and aesthetic jumping off point, I did not want to create the illusion we were in the 1930s. It was always very important for me to keep the overt theatricality that Brecht calls for. I reminded my

design team that Brecht said, “the starting point must always be a poor theatre trying to do its best.” Ian Wallace and I spoke about making the theatre into a space that is inhabited by poor actors who (going back to the original trunk show idea) create each scene with props and set pieces they happen to have on hand. This led us to the elaborate stacks of beds that the set eventually became. The theatre was transformed into a giant “Hooverville” where the actors would live, change costumes and relax while the show was being performed. Only a few well chosen props were placed around the bed to *suggest* the setting, but the stage was always nothing more than a stage.

While the costumes used a 1930s silhouette, we were consciously anachronistic in the use colors, fabrics and prints from a wide range of periods to illustrate the timelessness of the piece. The actors all wore heavy white make-up to help achieve the Brechtian distance.

The final aspect of the concept (the one that would tie all of these ideas and designs together) was the acting. Brecht’s text calls for a “Scientific acting”. This is a very specific style that does not require the actor to become the character, but to work in synchronicity with the character he or she is creating. The actor, in a sense, stands next to the character. From this outside perspective, the actor may push the character further than would normally be *comfortable* one moment, then step away from the character and comment about that very behavior.

Brecht wrote that drama is the most powerful when it has the visceral impact of a sporting event. This was a philosophy I took to heart in this rehearsal process. Because the ideas of the play are already so overt, I felt it important to approach the beginnings of

rehearsal in a strictly physical way. Only by unlocking the physiology of the characters first were we able to present the intellectuality in such an effortless manner. This resulted in a very athletic performance style that, I would like to think, hit the audience on a very visceral level.

I am so proud that *The Threepenny Opera* was my Thesis Production because it represents everything I was trying to do artistically before I came to UCSD, but never had quite enough practical skill or resources to pull off. More important than the critical and box-office success is the fact that I consider this production to my biggest artistic success to date. With the help of my collaborators I was able to see my artistic vision realized well beyond my wildest expectations.