
Brecht's Broadway Debut: The Faithful Failure of *3-Penny Opera* (1933)

Garrett Eisler

In April 1933, at the nadir of the Great Depression, the first American production of Brecht and Weill's Threepenny Opera was a Broadway flop. Many have attributed the failure to a poor representation of the work. But closer examination reveals a concerted effort to faithfully reproduce the original 1928 Berlin staging and a nuanced critical reception that included many political objections. Brecht and Weill's "Beggar's Opera" was a box office failure but its subversive essence still reverberated all too well in Depression-era New York.



The standing of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's musical *The Threepenny Opera* in the American theatre rests largely on the long-running success of Marc Blitzstein's 1954 adaptation at the Theatre de Lys in Greenwich Village.¹ But this was not the work's US premiere. In the spring of 1933, nearly five years after its German premiere, an attempt was made to import this recent European success to New York at a time when the play and its authors were almost completely unknown there. After a brief Philadelphia "tryout," *The 3-Penny Opera* (as it was billed) opened at Broadway's Empire Theatre on 13 April 1933 but closed nine days later, after only twelve performances, leaving it to the next generation of Americans to "rediscover" what is now Brecht and Weill's most popular work. When

Garrett Eisler is currently an instructor at The New School's Eugene Lang College. He holds a PhD in theatre from the CUNY Graduate Center and an MFA in directing from Boston University. His research focuses on American political drama between 1920 and 1950 and his current book project is about Ben Hecht's Jewish activism during the World War II era. His essay on Hecht's 1941 antifascist pageant *Fun to be Free* appears in the recent anthology *Experiments in Democracy: Interracial and Cross-Cultural Exchange in American Theatre, 1912–1945* (Southern Illinois UP, 2016). He has also written criticism and feature articles for *American Theatre* magazine, the *Village Voice* and *Time Out New York*, and from 2005–2013 he wrote the theatre blog "*The Playgoer*" (www.playgoer.org).

Brooks Atkinson, the long-serving *New York Times* critic, reviewed the revival in 1956, he referenced the earlier incarnation's failure as instructive to the new version's success. "If 'The Threepenny Opera' failed on Broadway in 1933," he wrote, "it was not because the mood was uncongenial. It failed because a stylized theatre work was not adapted and produced brilliantly enough" (Atkinson).

Atkinson's assessment echoes most other explanations of why the 1933 *3-Penny Opera* was a Broadway flop—a failure of execution, not conception.² Contemporary reviews do complain of weaknesses in acting, direction, and English translation. But, as historical evidence, such inherently subjective (and second-hand) judgments are of limited value, especially in the case of a script of which no copy survives. While we may choose to rely on these accounts to determine how *3-Penny Opera* fared as entertainment, a closer inspection of the surviving evidence of the production and its reception reveals other, more ideological responses as well, responses that strongly suggest Atkinson misjudged how "congenial" of the "mood" of that historical moment was.³

Closer examination of the production itself indicates a striking commitment by its producers to replicate the original *Dreigroschenoper* production in all of Brecht and Weill's "stylized" idiosyncrasies in a manner more faithful, at least on the surface, than the 1950s revival.⁴ And a full survey of the reviews reveals just as many objections to the content of the work as to its style of presentation. In fact, "uncongenial" is exactly the "mood" that comes across in many reviews to a theatrical work that brazenly challenged so much about Broadway's bourgeois values, both aesthetic and political.

Such resistance and distaste for *Threepenny's* more confrontational subjects (poverty, corruption, crime) also appears to have been grounded in the specific timing of this unusual Broadway premiere. April 1933 was, by many measures, one of the economically lowest points of the Great Depression. Although Depression-era New York, where breadlines were still a common sight, might strike us today as an ideal setting for a modern "Beggars' Opera," such resonance only worsened the play's American reception at a moment of peak-level anxiety about the economy—including the Broadway economy. (*3-Penny Opera* was hardly the only flop of the 1932–1933 season.) Could such a work ever have been expected to succeed commercially in such an environment? Or should "success" be defined differently when looking back at such a case, perhaps by the work's ability to disturb and discomfort an audience during difficult times, rather than serve as an escapist entertainment? On those terms, the 1933 *3-Penny Opera* may have succeeded after all.

Preparations

Unlike more outwardly avant-garde projects Brecht and Weill were collaborating on in the late 1920s (like the *Mahagonny-Songspiel* and the “teaching play” *Der Jasager*), *Die Dreigroschenoper* was conceived of from the beginning as a work for the commercial theatre. Brecht was asked in 1928 to submit a script for the re-opening of an old Berlin playhouse, the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm. He proposed one project he was currently working on—an adaptation of *The Beggar’s Opera*, John Gay’s 1728 English comedy, which his frequent collaborator Elizabeth Hauptmann had just translated into German. Rather than use the original’s music and songs, he enlisted Weill to write a new score that would help modernize this two hundred-year old British text for their Berlin audience. Brecht ended up retaining just the skeletal outline of Gay’s plot about London’s criminal underworld while retaining its major characters: the crime boss Peachum; his daughter Polly; his rival, the “highwayman” Macheath (whom Polly marries); and an ensemble of petty thieves and prostitutes. By the time the Brecht-Weill-Hauptmann adaptation opened on 31 August 1928, Gay’s title had been changed to *Die Dreigroschenoper* (literally, “the three-cent opera”), his time period updated about a hundred years to the early Victorian era, and the eighteenth-century folk songs and ballads replaced by Weill’s accessible yet distinctly modernist score, “a high-low stylistic mix drawing on baroque idioms, traditional and popular song, opera and operetta, even (at the end) Lutheran chorale, and colored throughout by the sonorities and idioms of the modern dance band” (Hinton, *Weill’s Musical Theater* 113).

Even the original *Dreigroschenoper* received mixed reviews in the Berlin press, but audiences flocked to the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm based on word of mouth of its musical and dramaturgical originality. It was at once classical and modernist, entertaining and polemical. While Gay’s comedy was seen by his London contemporaries as satirizing the current parliament by representing its leaders as criminals, Brecht stressed the parallels between crime and business and travestied the sanctimonious bourgeois morality that condemns the criminal (i.e., poorer) classes. Weill’s music likewise mocked the sentimentality of formulaic commercial genres like Viennese operetta. This double appeal to bourgeois audiences, who consumed the play’s gestures at entertainment uncritically, and young modernists, who relished its multiple levels of irony, enabled *Dreigroschenoper* to find success in many of the theatre capitals of Europe, leading to what some even called a *Dreigroschenfieber* —“Threepenny Fever.”⁵

But even at the time, this “fever” concerned some of the work’s admirers as a betrayal of its inherent subversiveness. Theodor Adorno led

the charge of positing a “misunderstanding” by most its fans, who he argued mistook Brecht and Weill’s parody of middlebrow entertainment for the “real thing” rather than hearing the faux-nostalgic parody in Weill’s score; the fact that “opera and operetta appear here with, as it were, a fixed grin,” Adorno wrote, “should make one wary of the fortuitous popularity” (130). Another “defender” of Brecht and Weill’s work “against its own success” (as Adorno put it) was Marxist critic Ernst Bloch, who regretted that “the unforgettable *Dreigroschenoper* music . . . succumbs to the danger of being applauded by a public for which it was not written” (qtd. in Hinton, “Misunderstanding” 183). Brecht also came to regret how his intended “critique of society” was overshadowed by “everything that didn’t matter to me: the romantic plot, the love story, the music” (qtd. in Kowalke 78). These are the qualities of bourgeois entertainment he dismissed as “culinary”—superficial pleasures to be passively consumed rather than problems to be actively argued with. Performing *Dreigroschenoper* on the commercial stage, then, whether in Berlin or New York, inherently invited such confusion over how to receive and “understand” it.

For all the play’s instant success across Europe, no interest was expressed in bringing it to New York until a pair of young, novice producers requested the rights in late 1932. John Krimsky and Gifford Cochran—twenty-seven and twenty-six years old, respectively—were independently wealthy, Ivy League-educated friends who embarked on a short-lived enterprise to import some of the more controversial and challenging modernist dramas to the American stage and screen. While abroad in 1932, they were so captivated by a new German film, *Mädchen in Uniform*, that they formed a production company to acquire the US distribution rights.⁶ Their release of *Mädchen*—a film written and directed by women, depicting sexual attraction between a female teacher and student in an all-girls school—to elite markets in selective cities proved surprisingly successful, leading them to believe they had found “an American audience for unusual works” (“Importers”). Emboldened by this response, they chose two similarly daunting projects to present the following season: one was a film version of Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*, starring Paul Robeson.⁷ The other was *Die Dreigroschenoper*, which Cochran said he had wanted to bring to Broadway ever since attending its opening night in Berlin. (He also claimed to have “probably seen it more than fifty times since then in its various showings in continental cities” [“Importers” 24]).⁸

There were few other American fans at the time, though, of a work so obscure on these shores. A rarefied circle of Europhiles and émigrés heard the 1930 phonograph recordings by the original Berlin cast.⁹ Otherwise the work’s main exposure had been G.W. Pabst’s 1931 German film adaptation, which was retitled (by Warner Brothers) for a subtitled US release as

The Beggar's Opera, referencing the better-known John Gay source material.¹⁰ But not only is Pabst's film vastly different from the play—so much so that Brecht and Weill sued over it—it was altered even further in this country by pre-Hays Code censors.¹¹ Pabst's own cuts retained less than thirty minutes of Weill's music, with many songs played instrumentally as background instead of sung. The fact that the film barely rated a mention in reviews of the Broadway *3-Penny Opera* two years later indicates that it did little to increase the work's American exposure beyond foreign film enthusiasts.

Brecht and Weill themselves were also unknown quantities in the American cultural landscape of the time. Outside of the coverage of the Pabst film, pre-1933 critical references to Brecht's plays are rare, and aside from the inclusion of an agitprop song ("Red Front") in a December 1932 Communist Party publication, no writings of his (dramatic, poetic, or theoretical) had yet been published in English (Baxandall 70–71). Some of Weill's early compositions—written when he was an emerging modernist composer in the shadow of Arnold Schoenberg—received scattered attention from American music critics and a few (including the Brecht-Weill *Lindberghflug* cantata) were given performances by major orchestras outside of New York.¹² (Coincidentally, two other Brecht works had their American premieres in April 1933, just after the Broadway *3-Penny Opera* closed: his experimental film *Kuhle Wampe* was screened at an 23 April labor event—under the title *Whither Germany?*—and, on 25 April, Brecht and Weill's *Jasager* began a run of four performances at the downtown Henry Street Settlement, another venue for New York labor activism.)¹³ Effectively, the Broadway *3-Penny* was the Broadway (and American theatrical) debut for both Brecht and Weill; while they would become iconic just a generation later, the horizon of expectations greeting their work then could not have been more different from today's.

As they secured the performance rights for *Dreigroschenoper* in December 1932, Krimsky and Cochran's plans for a spring 1933 opening turned out to be unfortunate in two ways, the first being the rise to power of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party in January 1933. Brecht and Weill both left Germany soon after the takeover (Brecht to Zurich in February, Weill to Paris in March) but, ironically, the dire circumstances made the United States a less likely place for them to travel to than before, when transport was less risky and did not entail permanent exile. (Weill did implore his music publishers, Universal Edition in Vienna, to sponsor a trip for the *3-Penny* opening, but they declined.)¹⁴ As much as a Broadway premiere might normally be a priority for playwrights and composers, these were no ordinary times, and both men were negotiating several obstacles to their continued work and survival.

The second historical factor working against Krimsky and Cochran was the ongoing struggles of the American economy in the Great Depression, which, by many measures, reached its worst levels in the early months of 1933. Unemployment rose to 25% and banking panics became so frequent that immediately upon inauguration as president, Franklin D. Roosevelt had to mandate the nationwide closure all banks for five days (the famous “Bank Holiday”). Roosevelt did not even take office until 4 March—the date originally stipulated by the Constitution—despite being elected the previous November, so the reforms of his New Deal legislation would still not take effect for months. For much of the year, according to historian David Kennedy, the United States remained “a wasteland of economic devastation” (Kennedy 133).

Like most businesses, Broadway suffered along with the fortunes of the nation, the stock market, and the bank accounts of its audience. In his introduction to *Best Plays of 1932–1933*, Burns Mantle wrote, “This theatre season survived on half rations. No more than half the theatres in New York were in use, something less than half the actors were employed, and virtually all bankrolls were in hiding” (Mantle). *Theatre Arts* magazine declared the New York theatre “in a temporary state of coma, brought on by the sluggishness of its economic readjustments to the facts of the deflation” (Denison). *Variety* summed up the season more bluntly as “Legit’s Worst Year.” Describing 1932–1933 as the industry’s “lowest point since the war,” the trade journal reported only nine genuine “hits” and seventeen “moderate successes” out of 117 total openings (which was down from the recent average of 150). *3-Penny Opera* may have flopped but so did ninety-one other shows (“Legit’s Worst”).¹⁵

Most conventional Broadway producers presenting an unknown musical (especially under such bleak business conditions) would have sought out star actors or enlisted a director with a proven track record.¹⁶ Instead, Krimsky and Cochran cast an ensemble of relative unknowns and tried to import as much of the original staging and design from the Berlin premiere as possible. Their chief link to the 1928 *Dreigroschenoper* was their chosen director, Francesco von Mendelssohn, a friend of both Weill’s and Cochran’s who had served as an assistant to the original director, Erich Engel.¹⁷ In hiring Mendelssohn, Krimsky and Cochran presumably intended him to remount (as assistant directors often do) the original staging. This led them to also retain Caspar Neher’s set, which they hired American designer Cleon Throckmorton to “adapt.”¹⁸ Production photos of *3-Penny Opera* indeed confirm a striking similarity to Neher’s 1928 designs, especially in their deployment of what would later become familiar “Brechtian” tropes—including a drawstring “half-curtain” actors pull across the stage, exposed electric “work lights” hanging from the flies,

screens for projected text and titles, and visible onstage musicians accompanying the songs. Reproducing Neher's set not only replicated the visual style of the 1928 *Dreigroschenoper*; encoded in it was the key to much of the staging as well. "Just as Weill and Brecht wrote their portions of the work in close consultation," writes Stephen Hinton, "so director Erich Engel drew his production ideas from Caspar Neher's drawings, and vice versa" ("The Première" 52). While today it is Brecht who is most commonly (if misleadingly) associated with the "epic" stagecraft emerging from 1920s German theatre, Engel and Neher arguably hold equal claim as pioneers of the form, being among Brecht's most frequent collaborators when he was developing the aesthetic that would later bear his name.¹⁹ In a later essay, Brecht even paid tribute to Engel's 1928 staging of *Dreigroschenoper* to be "the most successful example of epic theatre" of that time (Giles 253).²⁰ Therefore, unlike the Pabst *Dreigroschenoper* film—which forced the story into the visual terms of a naturalistic cinematic narrative—the Krimsky-Cochran 3-*Penny* retained more of the epic theatre qualities of the work that we today consider distinctly "Brechtian."

Importing staging and scenic ideas from Berlin to New York was relatively easy compared to turning Brecht's dialogue and lyrics into speakable and singable English. Whether out of convenience or pure ego, the young American producers decided to expedite the process by taking it on themselves; Cochran (who, lived in Munich many years and presumably knew German) collaborated with Krimsky's brother Jerrold, a budding playwright. Neither man had had any professional writing experience or published any work in either English or German, and, with rehearsals starting in March, they had only two months to complete the translation.²¹ Without an extant script, judgements as to the literary merit of their work rests mostly with the contemporary reviews, which called it "awkward" (Brown), "heavy-handed" (Garland), and "clumsy and jarring" ("Stage"). But in a season dominated by glamorous and "classy" hits like Noel Coward's *Design for Living* and Cole Porter's *The Gay Divorcee*, these complaints, in context, might say more about Broadway preferences for high diction in dialogue and lyrics than what would have best served the language of Brecht's Soho slum denizens.

One significant aspect of the Krimsky-Cochran script that is evident even without an extant text is its close adherence to the version of *Dreigroschenoper* published immediately after its premiere, not Brecht's 1931 revised edition—in which, as if to rectify his concerns about the play's initial "misunderstanding," he interpolated more explicitly Marxist arguments and language into the dialogue of certain scenes. While it was theoretically possible for Krimsky and Cochran to obtain a copy of this very limited edition while in Germany, it would not have been very useful

for performance since it did not correlate with Weill's score. (Brecht had undertaken the revision without consulting Weill at all.) It was also not the version officially licensed for performance at the time by the joint publishers Universal Edition (music) and Felix Bloch Erben (libretto) and which was being performed throughout Europe. While some have argued the revised text better reflects Brecht's authorial intent, the 1928 edition—with far more extensive stage directions—more clearly represents the way *Dreigroschenoper* was originally performed. According to Steve Giles, "the 1931 version is designed to be read" while "the 1928 text bears the imprint of its theatrical realization" (253).²² Aided, then, by Mendelssohn's direction (borrowed from Engel), Neher's designs, and a script that documented so many aspects of the first performance, Krimksy and Cochran were now prepared to faithfully "import" what they trumpeted in advertisements as "The Continental Success" ("Display Ad").

Reactions

One major alteration to the original *Dreigroschenoper*, however, came later, after a week of previews in Philadelphia (beginning on 1 April) at a moment when the producers finally appear to have given into commercial pressures. The Philadelphia notices (granted, from a smaller press corps) were on balance more positive than they would be in New York. The *Public Ledger* critic called it "a rich and racy diversion, plentifully supplied with good music and people who could sing it, gay and colorful in its settings and costumes and quaint and provocative in its story. . . . [A] superior and exciting novelty" (Waters). But, at the end of the week, *Variety* reported that its nine scheduled performances "never attained figures expected," rendering it an official "disappointment" ("Cohan Show Builds"). Krimsy and Cochran then delayed New York opening from 10 April to 13 April, by which time two consequential decisions appear to have been made: one was to cut the first scene of the play, the other was to hire a new director—Zeke Colvan, whose name appears next to Mendelssohn's in the *New York Times*' 14 April review, but not in the official program (Nichols).²³

Colvan's hiring signals a notable shift away from the project's origins as an independent, avant-garde, and "Continental" venture since his main notoriety on Broadway at the time was as Florenz Ziegfeld's chief "dialogue director," in which capacity he was responsible for the dramatic staging of non-dancing scenes (i.e., rehearsing actors) in all the major Ziegfeld productions of the late twenties and early thirties, including *Show Boat* and many *Ziegfeld Follies* revues.²⁴ As a consummate Broadway insider, he would have been a natural candidate for not just restaging the musical, but to serve as overall "play doctor" to "fix" a show that is in

trouble.²⁵ While no documentation directly links Colvan's hiring to the cutting of scene 1, it is the kind of choice a purely commercially-minded play doctor would conceivably make to improve a show seen as unentertaining: first, it was the only scene that had no songs (after those written for it had already been cut earlier);²⁶ second, its main character, Peachum, is, in conventional terms, the play's villain, an unattractive elderly Pantalone-type foil; and, third, it was delaying the entrance (in scene 2) of the show's two real "leads" (in Broadway terms), the young attractive singers playing the "lovers" Macheath and Polly. In short, cutting the scene would have had the effect of favoring the production's "culinary" appeals over its ideological provocations.

While the actual content of scene 1 may be expendable in terms of exposition (the main plot point is the Peachums hearing that their daughter eloped with Macheath, but the next scene shows the wedding party itself), it is crucial thematically in establishing Brecht's interplay of poverty, morality, and capitalism. And this may have been another incentive to cut it. Its setting is Peachum's "Outfitting Shop for Beggars," where he and Mrs. Peachum ply their trade of equipping men with fake begging costumes to collect money that they will take a healthy percentage of. In his opening lines about his business, Peachum says some particularly confrontational things to the audience about the quintessential bourgeois virtue of charity, a touchy subject at a time of great economic hardship:

Something must be done. My business is too hard, for my business is arousing human sympathy. There are a few things that stir men's souls, just a few, but the trouble is that after repeated use they lose their effect. Because man has the abominable gift of being able to deaden his feelings at will, so to speak. Suppose, for instance, a man sees another man standing on the corner with a stump for an arm; the first time he may be shocked enough to give him tenpence, but the second time it will only be fivepence, and if he sees him a third time he'll hand him over to the police without batting an eyelash. (Brecht 149–50)²⁷

As David Kennedy writes, "Mute shoals of jobless men drifted through the streets of every American city in 1933" (163). With one in four of all adult American males potentially a beggar, Peachum might have been no easy figure to laugh either with or at. Philadelphia audiences may have taken Peachum's speech as a sick joke on the sanctity of the figure Roosevelt had already dubbed "the forgotten man." Or perhaps they bristled more at Brecht's intended joke at the expense of those rich enough to *give* charity. As Peachum goes on to say in the scene, after quoting the proverb "It is more blessed to give than to receive": "What good are the most beautiful,

the most poignant sayings . . . when they get expended so quickly?" (Brecht 150).

Further complicating responses to Peachum was the casting of the role with vaudeville comedian Rex Weber, who, just the season before, had debuted the song, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime" in a Broadway revue.²⁸ That song—especially in Weber's highly praised rendition—became an instant popular anthem of the Depression, focusing public sympathy on the plight of America's millions of new beggars, especially those who fell from respectable prosperity in the twenties. (The hero of the song once "built a railroad," as one famous verse reminds us, but "now it's done.") For many New York critics, the memory of Weber's last role inevitably hovered over this very different one. As critic Robert Garland of the *New York World Telegram* noted, "you constantly expect him to burst into 'Brother, can you spare a nickel of that dime I spared for you?'" (Garland, 14 April 1933). Brecht might have approved of this built-in distancing effect Weber brought to the role, bringing attention to himself as an actor, not the character, and that he sang a very different tune about poverty the previous season.²⁹

The effort to diminish Peachum's role could very well have been a last-minute attempt by the producers (and their new play doctor) to downplay the aspect of *Dreigroschenoper* most pertinent to its new Depression-era context: the subject of poverty. Becht's play is arguably more about "begging" than even the original *Beggar's Opera*. (Gay's title refers to one specific "Beggar" character who introduces and closes the play.) In Gay, Peachum is the "boss" of all the criminals, including Macheath; Brecht gives his "Mack the Knife" a gang of his own and invents a new "racket" for Peachum: exploiting the sentimental appeal of charity to the modern bourgeoisie, as a safeguard against more drastic and far-reaching political solutions.

If cutting scene 1 was meant to defang the play's anticapitalist critique, then it was not successful. Even critics most hostile to the play's political implications were able to clearly identify them as a reason for their dislike of *3-Penny Opera*, attesting to the production's effectiveness at getting Brecht's voice across. Many especially resented the coopting of *The Beggar's Opera*, an English classic that they nostalgically sanitized as a piece of Anglophile high culture, not the controversial and bawdy work it was historically received as. *Time* magazine expressed dismay that Gay's "spirit of cutpurse abandon has been superseded by an atmosphere which is often sullen, often merely dirtily proletarian" ("New Plays in Manhattan"). Gilbert Gabriel of the *New York American* (an outlet of the right-wing publishing empire of William Randolph Hearst), references Brecht's

reputation in Germany as “a well known socialistic wit” while disapproving of this “much continentalized version” of John Gay:

Here are your old friends . . . Polly Peachum, Captain Macheath, Lucy, and the rest . . . all turned rather grim and scowly, communistic. . . . This Teuto-universal version dresses them in frank, harshly foul tatters, in the gritty sarcastic drabness of the rags of the under-dogs of all the world. (Gabriel)

Gabriel also finds more social value in *Beggar's* “caricature of wicked old [eighteenth-century Prime Minister] Robert Walpole” than Brecht’s “embittered stumping on behalf of the lower and criminal classes” of the present. John Mason Brown of the *New York Evening Post* similarly condemned this “retelling of the famous Macheath-Polly Peachum story in terms of irrelevant social preachments . . . with its tiresome topical references to income taxes and capitalists” (Brown). The *New York Evening Journal's* John Anderson went further in decrying Brecht’s “dismembering of the old opera to stuff it with propaganda” (Anderson).

The sometimes excited hostility toward any hint of radicalism in *3-Penny* (the *Sun's* Richard Lockridge considered it “oddly festooned with propaganda” preaching “sugar-coated communism”) remind us of the high-stakes ideological debates at a time when the immanent failure of capitalism in America was routinely being predicted and—in communism’s pre-“Popular Front” phase—the Soviet Union was still officially preaching “world revolution.” (The “Red Scare” and anti-radical Palmer Raids of the early 1920s were also within recent memory.) Anderson of the *Evening Journal*, another Hearst paper, voices this anxiety most overtly:

For some reason . . . John Gay’s enchanting ‘Beggar’s Opera’ has been hacked into a heavy piece of Teutonic Communism. . . . [I]t is interesting to wonder what possible connection the German adapters of the story between the dashing adventures of the gallantly criminal Captain Macheath and the inept political mouthings of their present hero. Their point seems to be that wealth makes poverty and poverty causes crime, a convenient theory which overlooks the facts of the criminologists and the not very recent news that there are a hearty number of rich crooks both in and out of jail, but mostly out. (Anderson)

At a time of 25% unemployment, sympathy for the “convenient theory” Anderson mocks about poverty causing crime must surely have been growing.

Other reviewers, however, detected Brecht’s deliberately irreverent appropriation of Gay. The academic cultural critic Joseph Wood Krutch at *The Nation* insisted “this deliberately perverted version of ‘The Beggar’s

Opera' . . . was not intended to be very much like Gay's opus. That is pervaded by a jolly sort of roast-beef and hearts-of-oak brutality, while 'The Three-Penny Opera' is unmistakably a product of Germany's despairing morbidity" (Krutch 540). Garland of the *World Telegram*—one of the play's most eloquent defenders in the daily press—saw how "upon the frank and rowdy humor of the old English original has been superimposed the mordant revolutionary spirit of a depressed continent given in lugubrious, but musically appealing ballads." Garland also had the insight to critically examine the reactions of the Broadway audience around him to a play that, as they could apparently tell, was not meant to please them:

There at the Empire Theatre, an unmistakably first-night audience seemed determined not to like it. Not to like it in a great, big way, I mean. . . . Ignoring the new deal and the prosperity that remains stubbornly around the corner, "The Three Penny Opera" thumbs its nose at everything an unmistakably first-night audience holds most dear. . . . Nothing, I'm here to tell you, is its sacred cow. Nothing is too right and righteous for its Rabelaisian razzberry. A rebel of an operetta, it walks boldly and bitterly through the autumn in which we all reside, kicking up the leaves and applying lighted matches where lighted matches are sure to do the greatest harm. (Garland, "Heart of Gold")

"A rebel of an operetta" recalls almost exactly what Adorno had said of Weill's subversive musical score five years earlier, just as Garland's depiction of an audience feeling threatened and awkwardly out of place complements Ernst Bloch's worry that *Dreigroschenoper* would be "applauded by a public for which it was not written."³⁰ It is not difficult to imagine Adorno and Bloch, in fact, being more pleased by the New York bourgeoisie's negative reaction to the play than by their Berlin counterpart's embrace of it. Rather than "misunderstanding" *Dreigroschenoper*, they may have concluded that Broadway understood it all too well.

That some of the more positive reviews made a point of quoting (or at least paraphrasing) specific lines from the play which spoke to the current historical moment demonstrates the Krimsky-Cochran translation's success at communicating Brecht's meaning in his more polemical passages. Krutch, for instance, cites a blistering speech of Peachum's from act 3, one that apparently survived despite the cutting of scene 1, effectively muffled the character:

[3-Penny's] cynicism of hopelessness . . . got under the skin. Consider, for example, the wandering soliloquy of the czar of the begging racket upon the essentials of his profession: "The rulers of the world can create misery but they can't bear to look at it. A man who has always had plenty to eat and always will have plenty, simply

cannot endure to see another man faint of hunger—that is, of course, if he does it on his doorstep.” If that, in its grotesque setting, is not a telling speech then I have lost my judgement. (540)

Another moment in the play singled out by a critic in the play’s defense was the “Second Threepenny Finale” (or, “What Keeps Mankind Alive?”), in which the actors (led by Macheath) are instructed by the libretto to step in front of the curtain, out of character, to sing directly to the audience about the hypocrisy of bourgeois values in the face of extreme poverty:

MACHEATH. You gentlemen who think you have a mission
 To purge us of the seven deadly sins
 Should first sort out the basic food position
 Then start your preaching: that’s where it begins.
 You lot, who preach restraint and watch your waist as well
 Should learn for all time how the world is run:
 However much you twist, whatever lies you tell
 Food is the first thing. Morals follow on. (Brecht 201)

The *New York Sun*’s Stephen Rathbun was struck by the risk of such a confrontational gesture and references the last line explicitly: “When a player sings a song about how beefsteak comes before the Golden Rule it arouses no pleasant feelings in theatergoers who do not know what the future has in store for them” (Rathbun).³¹ Surely those paying the top price of \$3.30 in the orchestra were a little more secure in the future than those in the advertised “Pop.[ular] Price Balcony Seats” of fifty cents (“Display Ad”).³² But Rathbun is also alluding to the kind of Depression-related anxiety prevalent among those who had more to lose, like the forlorn hero of “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime.”

Rathbun was another rare critic who was acutely perceptive of how Brecht and Weill’s iconoclastic musical was reverberating in its new Depression-shocked environment. In a piece published a few days after *3-Penny*’s closing, he offered a critical postmortem on its disappointing reception:

The fact that Bert Brecht’s modernization of ‘The Beggar’s Opera’ is somber and depressing is, no doubt, the reason why it was unsuccessful on Broadway. In these days, if people want to be depressed, they can stay at home! Why should they pay money to be depressed in the theater? . . . [*3-Penny Opera*] has style and distinction and was, for the most part, well sung and well acted, but its gloom received no welcoming response from New York audiences. When gloom on the stage meets gloom in the audience the result is failure for any play. At least that is what happens in America.

As the last sentence implies, Rathbun was contrasting the chilly reception to the work in New York to its embrace by Berliners. Before the Depression became worldwide, the Weimar Republic had already been through a decade of comparable economic hardship when *Dreigroschenoper* first opened, and that did not impede its success there. But Rathbun turns this seeming contradiction into a critique of his fellow countrymen's complacency: "The people of Germany have been long inured to hard times, but depression is a new and bitter experience for most Americans." No wonder the "ermine audience at the First Night performance," as another critic observed, "sat on its hands" (Bolton).

That even this abridged *3-Penny Opera*—based on the purportedly less "political" 1928 text—was considered by many critics to be so (for better or worse) provocative confirms how much of *Dreigroschenoper*'s true voice survived the Krinsky-Cochran production, whatever its flaws. Not only had a key scene been lost, but some songs that today are considered essential to the work (including the "Solomon Song" and "Ballad of Sexual Dependency") were absent from the outset—as they were opening night in Berlin.³³ And yet even Robert Benchley of that bastion of urbane liberalism, the *New Yorker*, carped that "Herr Bert Brecht . . . has thrown in a great deal of sociological and political satire which may have been delicious stuff in the original German of the 'Dreigroschenoper' but in its English adaptation is only mildly important" (Getchell 153). In retrospect, the issues *3-Penny Opera* was confronting the Broadway audience with in the spring of 1933 seem anything but "mild." Not even a Ziegfeld showman like Zeke Colvan could de-politicize it enough.

Conclusion: "A Contemporary Note"

In a June 1933 issue documenting the recently ended season, *Theatre Arts* magazine published a production still from *3-Penny Opera*'s "brief visit" to New York. The photo shows Peachum's shop at the opening of act 3 (the same scene quoted in Krutch's review). Immediately apparent are the signature elements of Caspar Neher's 1928 *Dreigroschenoper* set: screen projections off to the sides featuring Neher's own expressionist drawings of locales; one end of a drawn half-curtain stage left; a large "fairground organ" covering the upstage wall, with an elevated stand for the onstage band; and what Brecht called "song lights"—electric lamps with exposed bulbs that descended to separate (not integrate) each musical number from the narrative. While the "new stagecraft" of European expressionist and symbolist drama had been making waves in the more high-art enclaves of New York theatre since the twenties, this was quite a modernist look for a Broadway musical.

But beyond its aesthetic idiosyncrasies, the image's most arresting feature is the striking tableau of beggars filling the stage. Preparing for their "work," they are writing signs to announce their (fake) infirmities—"Sole Support for an Extensive Family," "Victim of Military Dictatorship," "Product of Industrial Civilization." As the magazine caption comments: "The conclave of beggars struck a contemporary note" ("Scene"). Indeed, even a detractor like the *Sun*'s Lockridge recognized that "several of the [pickets] might be carried in Union Square." A theatre historian happening on the photo without context could easily mistake the scene for something from one of the "workers' theatre" companies then beginning to flourish downtown

Broadway, however, had only barely addressed the Great Depression from the stage by 1933. The fiery classics of thirties political theatre we now associate with what Harold Clurman later famously dubbed "The Fervent Years"—Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937), and Harold Rome's *Pins and Needles* (1937)—were still a few years off. (Clurman considered the January 1935 premiere of *Lefty* "the birth cry of the thirties," even though the decade was half over [Clurman, *Fervent Years* 148].) The one Broadway hit from the 1932–1933 season that did focus on the current economic downturn was George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber's *Dinner at Eight*, but its narrative told of the fears and misfortunes of the wealthy New York elite. More instructive is the fate of a Kaufman title from later that fall, a sequel to his popular musical *Of Thee I Sing* (1931) called *Let 'em Eat Cake*, in which the US government is overthrown by radical revolutionaries from Union Square.³⁴ *Of Thee I Sing* ran over a year and was still touring in 1933; *Let 'em Eat Cake* closed after ninety performances.

A major reason for the greater receptiveness to politically challenging content later in the decade was the growing alliance of liberals and radical leftists known as the Popular Front—a movement officially decreed by the Russian-based Communist International in the summer of 1935, encouraging communist parties around the world to join forces with less revolutionary progressives for the sake of fighting fascism. In the United States, this ideological shift fostered what Michael Denning considers a broader "laboring of American culture." By 1935 these specialized political objectives had already begun to surface in the New York theatre. While workers' theatres had been active downtown since the late twenties, the Theatre Union gained new visibility with the Broadway transfer of their production of George Sklar and Albert Maltz's *Peace on Earth* in the spring of 1934. In 1931 the newly formed Group Theatre failed on Broadway with documentary play about the Depression (called *1931–*), but four years later it had two simultaneous commercial hits with *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake*

and Sing! (The founding of the New Deal's Federal Theatre Project in 1935 was also a boon to radical political theatre.) No wonder that the Theatre Union and the Group provided Brecht and Weill with their next New York productions; Theatre Union presented *The Mother* (Brecht's adaptation of Gorky) in 1935, and the Group commissioned a new American musical from Weill, *Johnny Johnson* (in collaboration with Paul Green). Ironically, the labor-affiliated Theatre Union had a harder time replicating Brecht's epic stagecraft than did Krimsky and Cochran; their Stanislavsky-based acting training and Ibsenite dramaturgy ended up working against the play.³⁵ And Weill's formal experimentation with *Johnny Johnson*, creating a true "play with music" instead of conforming to contemporary Broadway expectations of "musical comedy" or "operetta," ended up garnering more critical admiration than box office sales. Still, compared to their earlier outing, these artists were less aberrant in a cultural landscape defined by Odets, Blitzstein, and the FTP's "Living Newspapers" than the late twenties-early thirties pantheon of Porter, Coward, and Kern and Hammerstein.

Then again, in retrospect, *Driegroschenoper* has not enjoyed much more success on Broadway since 1933 either, even as Americans' knowledge of Brecht and Weill increased. The Blitzstein adaptation of the 1950s remained Off Broadway (a brand new phenomenon then) at the 299-seat Theatre de Lys for the entirety of its six-year run. A 1989 revival, conceived of as a vehicle for the rock star Sting, closed after sixty-five performances. The 1976 New York Shakespeare Festival production has been the longest running so far, at 307 performances, but even though it was officially designated a "Broadway"-level (and Tony award eligible) production, it was produced by a nonprofit, subscription-based company and presented a mile north of the Times Square theatre district at Lincoln Center. The reception greeting another nonprofit institution's attempt, the Roundabout Theatre's 2006 revival, was more typical; after 32 previews, 77 performances and largely negative reviews, it closed without extending its announced limited run. The dissatisfied *Variety* critic in 1933 may have stumbled onto the truth when he speculated that *3-Penny Opera* "would have been more appropriate to one of those curious theatres in the Village," as opposed to the opulent, thousand-seat Empire Theatre in the heart of Broadway (Ibee).³⁶

Staged in the heart of the bohemian and beatnik scene of Christopher Street at the birth of Off Broadway two decades later, this "rebel of an operetta" finally found that necessary "congenial" audience that Krimsky and Cochran could not. But Blitzstein's production, in many ways, significantly adapted and reframed the original *Driegroschenoper* to appeal to what was most sellable in its time. Presented almost as a memorial tribute

to Weill (who by the time of his death in 1950 was no longer a “Teutonic” modernist, but a successful composer of more commercially amenable Broadway musicals), it featured his widow, Lotte Lenya as Jenny—a role originally conceived of as secondary but substantially enhanced by Blitzstein’s reassignment of songs. (Unlike in 1933, this *Threepenny* had a real “star.”) The show’s success also led, as an unexpected byproduct, to the surprise popularization and commodification of Brecht and Weill’s opening “*Moritat*” song—extracted from its original dramatic context—as a chart-topping hit “single” sung to swing-orchestra accompaniment by the likes of Louis Armstrong and Bobby Darin as a tribute to gangster swagger. Adorno and Bloch’s worst nightmare come true.

The profoundly different postwar (and post-Depression) cultural moment of the mid-1950s offered a new context of prosperity, not poverty, a climate in which Americans could learn to love “Mack the Knife.” But as Harold Clurman would reflect in his review of the Blitzstein revival,

The epoch [of *The Threepenny Opera*] is not just the Berlin of 1919–1928; it is any epoch in which . . . fierce contrasts of prosperity and poverty shapes the dominant tone of society. The state of mind is one of social impotence so close to despair that it expresses itself through a kind of jaded mockery which mingles a snarl with tears We [in the 1950s] do not live in such a time—though people who remember the depression days between 1930 and 1935 will appreciate the mood of *The Threepenny Opera* most readily. (Clurman, *Collected Works* 293)

Many in the 1933 audience did at least perceive that “mood,” whether or not they “appreciated” it. If anything, it may have been too painfully familiar. □

Notes

¹ *The Threepenny Opera*, translated and adapted by Marc Blitzstein, initially played a limited run at the Theatre de Lys from 10 Mar. 1954 to 30 May 1954. It then returned for an open-ended engagement on 20 Sept. 1955 and continued until 17 Dec. 1961.

² Various aspects of the 1933 *3-Penny Opera* Broadway production have been documented in previous scholarship. The most thorough account remains Kowalke. More recently, Mark Grant’s essay “Before Blitzstein” (2014) summarizes the basic extant evidence. Notable earlier accounts include Himmelstein (1966) and Weisstein (1963). Parker’s recent Brecht biography briefly references

the production with startling inaccuracy, saying that it starred Lotte Lenya and Louis Armstrong—a claim easily disproven (248).

³ It is not even clear that Atkinson saw the 1933 production. Although he was already the lead drama critic at the *New York Times*, the paper's review of *3-Penny Opera* was written by Lewis Nichols.

⁴ Unlike the 1933 production, which remounted much of the staging and scenery from the 1928 Berlin premiere, the Theatre de Lys revival featured original staging by Carmen Capalbo and scene design by William Pitkin.

⁵ The original *Dreigroschenoper* production ran over two years in Berlin and "saw an amazing 130 productions on the Continent over the next four years" ("The Threepenny Opera in Europe").

⁶ According to Krinsky, Cochran provided most of the financial support for their enterprise: "My partner Gifford Cochran was independently wealthy. An heir to the Alexander Smith Carpet Company, probably the largest in the world at that time, he was willing to gamble some of his own money. . . . [O]n an investment of \$22,000 [*Mädchen*] had grossed close to a million. So our small company had a good reputation and ample funds" (96).

⁷ *The Emperor Jones* (1933) would be the team's only original film. It went into production only weeks after *3-Penny Opera* closed on Broadway and was released later that fall. Krinsky and Cochran produced it independently at New York's Astoria studios, with a screenplay by *Porgy* author DuBose Heyward (later co-author of *Porgy and Bess*) and directed by avant-garde filmmaker Dudley Murphy. The African-American subject matter and the casting of a black actor in the starring role made the project unattractive to major studios.

⁸ Exaggeration aside, Cochran did have the opportunity to see at least some European productions of *Dreigroschenoper* since he was living in Munich, studying painting, during the late 1920s and early 1930s.

⁹ Harold Clurman, who produced Weill's first American work, *Johnny Johnson*, for the Group Theatre in 1936, recalled that even by that time "he was little known except by musicians who had been to Berlin and by adventurous spirits who enjoyed picking up exotic flowers in odd byways of the entertainment world or on imported records" (*Collected Works* 226).

¹⁰ The title page of the Warner Theatre's printed program for the New York release of the film reads: "'The Beggar's Opera' ('Die 3 Groschen Oper') [*sic*] / All-Talking / German Musical Drama!" ("Warner").

¹¹ Brecht wrote at length about his battle with Pabst over the film in his essay "*Der Dreigroschenprozess*," known in English as "The Threepenny Lawsuit." A 1960 article about a restored re-release of Pabst's film claimed that, until that point, "The German version of the film has never been shown in the United States in its original form" (*Showbill*).

¹² In 1930 the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra programmed Weill's violin concerto, and, in 1931, Leopold Stokowski conducted the Philadelphia Orchestra in *Der Lindberghflug* ("Lindbergh's Flight")—the first documented public performance of any Brecht work in America. Also working against both Weill and Brecht was a lingering anti-German prejudice from World War I. According to Geoffrey Cahn, "German literature, theater, film, and art were generally poorly received by American critics and audiences during the 1920s and early 1930s," and "the Broadway stage was closed to German drama not only for the duration of the war but into the 1919–1920 season" (Cahn 186–87).

¹³ The Henry Street Settlement *Jasager* stands out as particularly notable today for the significance of its two co-directors: actor Sanford Meisner, then of the progressive Group Theatre and later a famous acting teacher, and conductor Lehman Engel, who went to be a prominent composer and teacher of Broadway musical theatre.

¹⁴ Weill's correspondence with his music publishers, Universal Edition between January and March of 1933 documents a confluence of crises, both professional and personal, as he negotiates how to continue working—preferably outside of Germany—under the threat of Nazism. He repeatedly expresses interest in traveling to New York for the Broadway *3-Penny*, but between the lack of financial support and his own film commitments in Paris, plans did not materialize by the time the production closed on 22 April. See Grosch.

¹⁵ The nine plays that Variety determined were unqualified "hits" were: Rachel Crothers' *When Ladies Meet*, George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber's *Dinner at Eight*, Sidney Howard's *The Late Christopher Bean*, Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II's *Music in the Air*, the musical comedy *Take a Chance*, S. N. Behrman's *Biography*, Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's *Twentieth Century*, Noel Coward's *Design for Living*, and *Strike Me Pink*, a revue starring Jimmy Durante. Of their "moderate successes" notable titles that stand out are Cole Porter's *The Gay Divorce* and Maxwell Anderson's Pulitzer-winning Washington satire *Both Your Houses* ("Legit's Worst").

¹⁶ The cast was led by two European-style operetta performers (Australian baritone Robert Chisholm as Macheath and Hungarian actress-dancer Steffi Duna as Polly) signaling Krimsky and Cochran's conception of their production as a European import. But alongside them was a combination of young Broadway actors (Marjorie Dille as Jenny Diver, Josephine Huston as Lucy Brown) and popular entertainers (vaudevillian Rex Weber as Peachum, and London music-hall singer Rex Evans as Tiger Brown). While many critics faulted at least some of the acting in *3-Penny Opera*, they differed on who was at fault. Each of the lead actors had their share of detractors and champions. Lewis Nichols in the *Times* actually offered blanket praise for the entire ensemble: "The cast . . . has been chosen excellently and Francesco von Mendelssohn has directed them gaily."

¹⁷ A *Brooklyn Eagle* article promoting *3-Penny Opera* stresses Cochran's pre-existing friendship with Mendelssohn as pivotal to his inside knowledge of the play, even that he "consoled" his "good friend" during the legendary chaotic dress

rehearsals leading to *Dreigroschenoper*'s premiere ("Importers" 25). The anecdote strengthens Cochran's claim of being at the premiere and suggests Mendelssohn's own role in bringing the play to Broadway may have been significant. Mendelssohn (a great-nephew of the famous composer) had been both a musician and theatre director in Berlin and returned there after the closing of the Broadway *3-Penny*. He soon thereafter fled Germany and returned to the US in 1937 as an assistant director to Max Reinhardt on the New York opening of Weill's opera *The Eternal Road*.

¹⁸ Throckmorton, a resident designer for the Provincetown Players, was instrumental (along with Provincetown colleague Robert Edmond Jones) in popularizing "the new stagecraft" (i.e., European-influenced modernism) in American stage design. His signature production was the highly expressionist sets and lighting he created for O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920).

¹⁹ John Fuegi, who has courted controversy by accusing Brecht of parasitically taking credit for his collaborators' contributions, nevertheless makes a compelling claim for attributing most of *Dreigroschenoper*'s "epic" qualities to Neher: "[T]he brilliant stage designer Caspar Neher was the main force in staging *Threepenny* in a manner so innovational, with the signature half-curtain and with the musicians on stage, that the production is felt by theatre historians to this day to have radically changed the practice of stagecraft" (Fuegi xxv).

²⁰ The essay cited is "New Perspectives on the Uses of Incidental Music" ("*Verwendung von Bühnenmusik nach neueren Gesichtspunkten*") from 1935. Giles quotes the original German: "die erfolgreichste Demonstration des epischen Theaters."

²¹ Although *3-Penny Opera* was his first produced script, Jerrold Krimsky did go on to enjoy some small success as a playwright, working again for his brother in the late 1930s when they together opened "The American Music Hall," a "new theatre fashioned from a dilapidated building which had originally been a church before being converted into a movie theatre. . . . It was decorated in the style of a Gay Nineties' beer hall and for a few years a series of old-fashioned musical melodramas were produced there" (Dietz 302). Jerrold Krimsky wrote many of the scripts (usually under the pseudonym "John Van Antwerp") including *The Fireman's Flame* (1937), *Naughty-Naught '00* (1937), and *The Girl from Wyoming* (1938). During World War II he served in the Army's Camera Combat Unit and the Office of War Information, where he produced Henri Cartier-Bresson's 1946 documentary *Le Retour (Reunion)* about the liberation of Dachau and other concentration camps. He died in 1948 at the age of 38. Gifford Cochran did not write any original plays or translations after *3-Penny Opera*.

²² Giles also argues that "although the 1931 edition is more ideologically explicit, it adds nothing of moment to the earlier version's exploration of the relationship between work and begging" (264).

²³ Above the cast list at the top of Nichols' *Times* review reads the line: "Staged by Francesco von Mendelssohn and Zeke Colvan."

²⁴ “The confusing near-interchangeability of director and stage managers in early twentieth-century musical theatre is poignantly illustrated by the forgotten career of Ezekiel Bredin ‘Zeke’ Colvan (1880–1945). Originally an actor, Colvan stage-managed many *Ziegfeld Follies*, Ziegfeld-produced book shows, and shows produced by the Shubert Brothers, the Theatre Guild, and others. . . . When the Depression hit Broadway, Colvan found steadier employment as a general stage manager of several municipal opera companies” (Grant 224–25). Colvan also went on to write a popular mid-century acting textbook, *Face the Footlights*.

²⁵ The fact that the New York production photos reveal no departure from the basic epic staging principles determined by Engel’s template and Neher’s scenery suggests that Colvan did not change any major aspects of Mendelssohn’s blocking.

²⁶ For reasons remaining unclear, the two songs written for scene one that were part of the 1928 premiere (Peachum’s “*Morgenchoral*” hymn and “*Anstatt-Dass*” duet with Mrs. Peachum) do not appear in the Philadelphia *3-Penny* program, even though the scene itself does. They would have been included in the official score and libretto obtained by Krinsky and Cochran, so they were either cut during rehearsals or dropped from their translation early on.

²⁷ All quotations from *Threepenny Opera* in English are from the 1976 translation by Ralph Manheim and John Willet (Brecht, *Collected Plays*).

²⁸ The song was featured in the 1932 edition of the Shubert Organization’s annual review *Americana*, opening 5 October 1932.

²⁹ Weber’s performance was also praised by Lewis Nichols of the *Times* who (inadvertently, it seems) makes the acutely Brechtian comment that “He can be Peachum when necessary, and Brecht when necessary, all without the flickering of an eye.”

³⁰ Even critic Gabriel of Hearst’s *New York American*, who hated the show, recognized Weill’s unique achievement: “In the modern idiom Mr. Weill has composed a collection of ballads, duets and finales which are stormily insinuating, mocking, stinging, memorable for their curiously bold, macabre tunefulness” (Gabriel).

³¹ This was also probably one of the songs *Billboard* magazine’s Eugene Burr had in mind when he praised *3-Penny*’s “tremendously effective tunes. . . rang[ing] from a pirate ditty [i.e., “Pirate Jenny”] to appallingly effective indictments of the human race. . . . The lightness and charm of [Gay’s] original tinkling ditties has, of course, been lost, but Brecht and Weill . . . have been little interested in lightness and charm. They go in for effect and they get it” (Burr 18, 53).

³² According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the worth of \$3 in 1933 was the equivalent of \$55 in 2016 dollars (“CPI Inflation Calculator”). After many shows with such high ticket prices flopped during the 1932–1933 season, Burns Mantle predicted, “The day of the \$3, \$4, \$5, \$6 theatre is about over” (Mantle 3).

³³ Three songs were cut at the last minute before the Berlin *Dreigroschenoper* premiere: “Solomon Song,” because the play was running too long; “The Ballad of Sexual Dependency,” because the actress playing Mrs. Peachum considered it too obscene; and “Lucy’s Aria,” because the actress playing Lucy Brown was not musically skilled enough to sing it. That the Broadway *3-Penny* also omitted these songs (despite the appearance of the first one in the published libretto) indicates how closely director Mendelssohn was following not just the written text but his memory of the Berlin performance. This is also reflected in the reassigning of the “Barbara Song” (originally written for Polly) to Lucy and retitling it “Lucy Song” (thereby replacing “Lucy’s Aria”) as was done in Berlin.

³⁴ Kaufman wrote both musicals with the team of co-librettist Morrie Ryskind and George and Ira Gershwin. *Of Thee I Sing* was the first musical to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama and was universally hailed for its political satire. But its target was the farce of presidential elections and Washington partisanship and—unlike its darker sequel—barely touched on the immediate realities of the Depression at all.

³⁵ See Baxandall, Saal, and Westgate for more on the Theatre Union’s staging of Brecht’s *The Mother*. Saal and Westgate apply the term “Broadway” to the production very loosely, using it to refer to all professional theatre in New York—even though the Theatre Union was not a commercial entity and *The Mother* did not perform in the recognized Broadway theatre district. (The “Off Broadway” classification had not been introduced yet.) In this context, the 1933 *3-Penny Opera* is additionally significant as Brecht’s true Broadway debut, as well as the only Broadway production of a Brecht play before the 1960s.

³⁶ Also instructive is the cold reception on Broadway to all Brecht plays. The 1976 *Threepenny Opera* remains the longest Broadway run for any Brecht title, followed only by three-to-four month runs in the 1960s and 1970s of *Mother Courage*, *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor Wiesengrund. “*The Threepenny Opera*.” Hinton, ed. 129–34.
- Anderson, John. “John Anderson Reviews.” *New York Evening Journal* 14 Apr. 1933: 14. Print.
- Atkinson, Brooks. “Songs and Cynicism.” *New York Times* 11 Mar. 1956: 129. *Proquest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 26 August 2016.
- Baxandall, Lee. “Brecht in America, 1935.” *Tulane Drama Review* 12.1 (1967): 69–87. Print.
- Blubacher, Thomas. *Gibt es etwas Schöneres als Sehnsucht?: die Geschwister Eleonora und Francesco von Mendelssohn*. Berlin: Insel Verlag, 2012. Print.

- Bolton, Whitney. "Unexpectedly, 'The 3-Penny Opera' is Quite Dull in its Modern Garb." *Morning Telegraph* 15 Apr. 1933: 3. Print.
- Brecht, Bertolt. *Collected Plays: Volume 2: A Man's A Man, Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny, The Threepenny Opera*. Trans. Ralph Manheim and John Willet. New York: Vintage, 1977. Print.
- Brown, John Mason, "'3-Penny Opera' Opens at the Empire" *New York Evening Post* 14 Apr. 1933: 17. Print.
- Burr, Eugene. "The New Plays on Broadway," *Billboard* 22 Apr. 1933: 18, 53. *Proquest Performing Arts Periodicals Database*. Web. 19 Aug. 2016.
- Cahn, Geoffrey S. "Weimar Music in America: Its Reception and Impact." *The Centennial Review* 29.2 (1985): 186–204. Print.
- Clurman, Harold. *The Fervent Years: The Group Theatre and the Thirties*. New York: Da Capo, 1983. Print.
- . *The Collected Works of Harold Clurman*. New York: Hal Leonard, 1999. Print.
- "Cohan Show Builds, \$14,000 in Philly." *Variety* 11 Apr. 1933: 45. *Proquest Performing Arts Periodicals Database*. Web. 19 Aug. 2016.
- "CPI Inflation Calculator." *Bureau of Labor Statistics*. Web. 28 Aug. 2016.
- Denison, Merrill. "Season's End." *Theatre Arts* June 1933: 415–21. Print.
- Denning, Michael. *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Verso, 1996. Print.
- Dietz, Dan. *Off Broadway Musicals, 1910–2007*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2010. Print.
- "Display Ad 20." *New York Times* 13 Apr. 1933. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 9 Sep. 2016.
- Fuegi, John. *Brecht and Co.: Sex, Politics and the Making of Modern Drama*. 2nd ed. New York: Grove, 2002. Print.
- Gabriel, Gilbert. "The Three-Penny Opera: From Gay to Grave, English to American via the Grim German." *New York American* 14 Apr. 1933: n. pag. *3-Penny Opera Clippings File*. Weill-Lenya Research Center, New York.
- Garland, Robert. "'Three-Penny Opera' a Fascinating Hybrid After Re-Translation." *New York World Telegram* 4 Apr. 1933: 28. Print.
- . "'Three-Penny Opera' a Frowning Rebel." *New York World Telegram* 14 Apr. 1933: 16. Print.
- . "Heart of Gold Hidden Under Hodge-Podge in Play at the Empire," *New York World Telegram* 15 Apr. 1933: 8. Print.

- Getchell, Charles, ed. *Benchley at the Theatre: Dramatic Criticism 1920–1946*. Ipswich: Ipswich P, 1985. Print.
- Giles, Steve. “Rewriting Brecht: *Die Dreigroschenoper* 1928–1931.” *Literaturwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch* 30 (1989): 249–79. Print.
- Grant, Mark. “Before Blitzstein: The American Odyssey of *The Threepenny Opera*.” *Kurt Weill Newsletter* 32.1 (2014): 4–8. Print.
- . *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 2005. Print.
- Grosch, Nils, ed. *Kurt Weill: Briefwechsel mit der Universal Edition*. (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2002). Print.
- Himmelstein, Morgan Y. “The Pioneers of Bertolt Brecht in America.” *Modern Drama* 9.2 (1966): 178–89. *Project Muse*. Web. 3 Aug. 2016.
- Hinton, Stephen. “Misunderstanding *The Threepenny Opera*.” Hinton, ed. 181–92.
- . “The Première and After.” Hinton, ed. 50–77.
- . *Weill’s Musical Theater: Stages of Reform*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2012. Print.
- Hinton, Stephen, ed. *Kurt Weill: The Threepenny Opera*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990. Print.
- Ibee [Jack Pulaski]. “Three Penny Opera.” *Variety* 18 Apr. 1933: 44. *Proquest Performing Arts Periodicals Database*. Web. 19 Aug. 2016.
- “Importers of ‘Maedchen’ Now Bring in ‘The 3-Penny Opera.’” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* 9 Apr. 1933: 24–25. *Newspapers.com*. Web. 23 Aug. 2016.
- Kennedy, David M. *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999. Print.
- Kowalke, Kim H. “*The Threepenny Opera* in America.” Hinton, ed. 78–119.
- Krimsky, John. “The Emperor Jones—Robeson and O’Neill on Film.” *Connecticut Review* 7.2 (1974): 94–99. Print.
- Krutch, Joseph Wood. “Drama: Loyalty and Passion,” *The Nation* 10 May 1933: 539–40. *The Nation Archive Premium Edition*. Web. 14 Aug. 2016.
- “Legit’s Worst Year Over.” *Variety* 6 June 1933: 51–52. *Proquest Performing Arts Periodicals Database*. Web. 19 Aug. 2016.
- Lockridge, Richard. “The New Play.” *New York Sun* 14 Apr. 1933: 24. Print.
- Mantle, Burns. *The Best Plays of 1932–1933*. New York: Dodd Mead, 1933. Print.
- “New Plays in Manhattan.” *Time* 24 Apr. 1933: 23. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 14 Aug. 2016.

- Nichols, Lewis. "The Chant of Newgate." *New York Times* 14 Apr. 1933: 22. *Proquest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 30 June 2016.
- Parker, Stephen. *Bertolt Brecht: A Literary Life*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. Print.
- Rathbun, Stephen. "In and About the Theater." *New York Sun* 24 Apr. 1933: n.p. *3-Penny Opera* Clippings File. Weill-Lenya Research Center, New York.
- Saal, Ilke. *New Deal Theatre: The Vernacular Tradition in American Political Theater*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.
- "Scene: 'The 3-Penny Opera.'" *Theatre Arts* June 1933: 474. Print.
- Showbill*. Aug. 1960: 9. *Dreigroschenoper* Film File. Weill-Lenya Research Center, New York.
- "Stage: '3-Penny Opera' Not Up to Mark Set by Gay." *Newsweek* 15 Apr. 1933: 26. *3-Penny Opera*. Clippings File. Weill-Lenya Research Center, New York.
- "The Threepenny Opera in Europe." *Threepenny Opera*. Kurt Weill Foundation. Web. 26 Aug. 2016.
- "Warner Theatre Programme." 15 May 1931. *Dreigroschenoper* Film File. Weill-Lenya Research Center, New York.
- Waters, Arthur B. "3-Penny Opera Turns Out to Be Real Stage Treat." *Philadelphia Public Ledger* 3 Apr. 1933. *3-Penny Opera* Clippings File. Weill-Lenya Research Center, New York.
- Weisstein, Ulrich. "Brecht in America: A Preliminary Survey." *Modern Language Notes* 78.4 (1963): 373–96. *JSTOR*. Web. 30 June 2016.
- Westgate, J. Chris, ed. *Brecht, Broadway and United States Theatre*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007. Print.

Copyright of New England Theatre Journal is the property of New England Theatre Conference, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.