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Directing The Threepenny Opera

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DIRECTING *THE THREEPENNY OPERA*

A Thesis

**Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts**

in

The Department of Theatre

**by
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B.A., Columbia University, 1991
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“There are authors who *must* be quarreled with – not because (or not only because) they are wrong and you are right, but because this is the only way they can be encountered.”

-Eric Bentley

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ABBREVIATIONS FOR WORKS CITED

If it is clear from the text which work is being referred to, only the page number will be cited. The following works will be referred to by the abbreviations listed below.

<i>The Threepenny Opera.</i> Translated by Robert David MacDonald	RM
<i>The Threepenny Opera.</i> Translated by Ralph Manheim and John Willett	MW
<i>Brecht on Theatre</i>	<i>BOT</i>
<i>Brecht: A Choice of Evils</i>	<i>BACE</i>
<i>The Brecht Commentaries</i>	<i>BC</i>
<i>The Life and Lies of Bertolt Brecht</i>	<i>LLBB</i>
<i>Kurt Weill: The Threepenny Opera</i>	<i>KWTPO</i>

ABSTRACT

This production thesis on directing Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *The Threepenny Opera* is divided into two sections. The first section consists of four research/critical chapters. Chapter 1 discusses the director's understanding of the theories of Bertolt Brecht. Chapter two discusses potential differences between the director's aesthetic point of view and Brecht's theories. Chapters 3 and 4 lay out the findings and opinions based on those findings of research into two issues that influenced production decisions: Chapter 3 focuses on Brecht's relationship with totalitarian communism and Chapter 4 looks into questions raised about the authorship of *The Threepenny Opera*.

Section II consists of a statement of the director's interpretation of the play and a journal that charts the production process from the selection of the play to opening night.

The Conclusion assesses how the director met certain challenges posed by the production.

SECTION I

Chapter 1 A Brief Definition of Epic Theatre

When a contemporary American with no background in aesthetic theory hears the term epic theatre, in all likelihood, he/she imagines theatre on a grand scale: a play that is over three hours long, a huge cast, towering sets, mythic subject-matter. Yet, this is not what Brecht means when he uses the term. In the glossary to *Theaterarbeit* – a book compiled by the Berliner Ensemble, chronicling its productions from 1949-51 – the following definition appears: “*Episch*, narrating. *Episches Drama* (In Brecht), a narrative drama about the state of society.” (*BOT*, p. 246). In fact, Eric Bentley suggests that “Narrative Realism” would be a more accurate label (p. 59).

Brecht contrasts the epic to the dramatic. His distinction is that the epic theatre narrates events, where the dramatic theatre creates the illusion that these events are actually taking place. According to Brecht, the epic actor recounts events, where the dramatic actor tries to become a character who is taking part in those events. Brecht derives his categories from Aristotle. Brecht also sets himself up in opposition to Aristotle, who he sees as the champion of the dramatic, labeling the epic theatre “non-aristotelian” (*BOT*, p. 79). In the *Poetics*, Aristotle compares and contrasts the epic poetry of Homer with the tragedy of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Yet, Aristotle does not include among his distinctions the fact that epic poetry is narrated and tragic poetry is acted. In fact, as Brecht admits, epic poets often spoke as or acted the roles of the characters in their poems.

Brecht’s distinction comes closer to Hegel’s and Nietzsche’s contrasting of epic and lyric poetry. The juxtaposition they make is that epic poetry is objective in that it is

the narration of events, where lyric poetry is the expression of the poet's personal feelings. Both see dramatic or tragic poetry as the union of the epic and lyric, in that drama tells a story, but each character expresses his/her subjective point of view. In his lectures on aesthetics, Hegel says, "dramatic poetry is the [art] which unites the objectivity of epic with the subjective character of lyric," (p. 1158).

Martin Esslin argues in *Brecht: A Choice of Evils*, that it is not against Aristotle that Brecht is reacting, but Goethe and Schiller. Esslin writes,

In formulating his theory of 'epic' theatre Brecht was reacting against the German classics' theory of drama: in 1787 Goethe and Schiller, the two giants of the German tradition, had jointly presented their point of view in an essay, 'On Epic and Dramatic Poetry'. It is against this specific theory that Brecht offered his counter-theory.

Goethe and Schiller had described the distinction between the epic and dramatic genres of poetry as follows: 'Their great essential difference lies in the fact that the epic poet presents the event as totally past, while the dramatic poet presents it as totally present.' ... Thus the epic poet, the rhapsodic singer, relates what happened in calm contemplation '... he will freely range forward and backward in time ... The actor, on the other hand, is in exactly the opposite position: he represents himself as a definite individual; he wants the spectators to participate ... in his action, to feel the sufferings of his soul and of his body with him, share his embarrassments and forget their own personalities for the sake of his ... The spectator must not be allowed to rise to thoughtful contemplation; he must passionately follow the action; his imagination is completely silenced ...'

It was this conception that Brecht abhorred ... (p. 113)

It is precisely "thoughtful contemplation" that Brecht wants ignite in the spectator. In "The German Drama: Pre-Hitler," he writes, "we have to make it possible for [the spectator] to take a critical attitude while he is in the theatre (as opposed to a subjective attitude of becoming completely 'entangled' in what is going on)," (*BOT*, p. 78). Brecht wants the spectator to direct this critical attitude towards society; the epic theatre aims to influence the audience to work towards changing the existing order. In

the same essay, Brecht writes, “The epic spectator says: I’d never thought it—That’s not the way –Extraordinary, hardly believable – it’s got to stop – ” (p. 71)

According to Brecht, the spectator is able to maintain a critical attitude precisely because epic theatre is narrative. It is not drawing the spectator into the illusion that he/she is witnessing the events of the story in the present, rather the epic theatre makes actual reality apparent – that the spectator is in a theatre and actors are recounting these events. No attempt is made to hide the fact that these events are taking place on a stage – the actors do not pretend there is a fourth wall, the lighting sources, and all the other technical elements are visible to the audience. The actors do not try to become the characters, rather they recreate their actions: “[the actor] reproduces their remarks as authentically as he can; he puts forward their way of behaving to the best of his abilities and knowledge of men; but he never tries to persuade himself (and thereby others) that this amounts to a transformation,” (p.137). Because the actor does not try to become the character, he/she – as well as the spectators – can maintain a critical distance from the character. “Because he does not identify himself with him he can pick a definite attitude towards the character whom he portrays, can show what he thinks of him and invite the spectator, who is likewise not asked to identify himself, to criticize the character portrayed,” (p. 137).

The shattering of the theatrical illusion and narrative acting are both what Brecht terms “alienation effects.”

What is involved here is, briefly, a technique of taking the human social incidents to be portrayed and labelling [*sic*] them as something striking, something that calls for explanation, is not to be taken for granted, not just natural. The object of the ‘effect’ is to allow the spectator to criticize from a social point of view. (p.125)

Alienation effects prevent the spectator from becoming “entangled,” thereby allowing the spectator to maintain a critical distance. Alienation effects can also be used to highlight and criticize.

The use of music and the use of projections are among Brecht’s alienation effects. In the 1928 production of *The Threepenny Opera*, Brecht and the director Erich Engel did not make it seem that the songs flowed naturally out of the action, but exposed them as theatrical devices they are. “For the singing of the *songs* a special change of lighting was arranged; the orchestra was lit up; the titles of the various numbers were projected on the screens at the back ... and the actors changed their positions before the number began,” (p. 85). Brecht uses the songs in *The Threepenny Opera* for a double purpose: for direct political commentary and to disrupt the spectator’s involvement in the play.

... in *The Threepenny Opera* the educative elements were so to speak built in: they were not an organic consequence of the whole, but stood in contradiction to it; they broke up the flow of the play and its incidents, they prevented empathy, they acted as a cold douche for those whose sympathies were becoming involved. I hope that the moralizing parts of *The Threepenny Opera* and the educative songs are reasonably entertaining, but it is certain that the entertainment in question is different from what one gets from the more orthodox scenes. (p. 132)

Projections and film are alienation effects used for the same purpose as music – to disrupt and comment on the action.

...the background adopt[ed] an attitude to the events on stage – by big screens recalling other simultaneous events elsewhere, by projecting documents which confirmed or contradicted what the characters said, by concrete intelligible figures to accompany abstract conversations ... (p. 71)

Brecht’s theories have led to criticism of his work as a playwright and director: that he is too doctrinaire in his theories and therefore he is rigid in his work as an artist; that he does not value entertainment in the theatre; that his writing is devoid of dramatic

tension and the actors under his direction are devoid of emotion; that his plays are not works of art, but mere propaganda.

Brecht denies the charge of rigidity. In 1941, he wrote in his diary,

It must never be forgotten that *non-aristotelian theatre* is only *one* form of theatre; it furthers specific social aims and has no claims to monopoly as far as theatre in general is concerned. I myself can use both aristotelian and non-aristotelian theatre in certain productions. (p.135)

As for entertainment, Brecht puts a great deal of emphasis on fun in his early theoretical writings. In "Emphasis on Sport," he criticizes the theatre of his day because it "doesn't contain a pennyworth of *fun*," (p. 7). It is true that Brecht's theoretical writings gradually become more doctrinaire and humorless. However, even as Brecht calls for didactic, educative theatre, he argues that this does not exclude entertainment. In "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction," he writes "there is such a thing as pleasurable learning, militant learning," (p. 73).

Despite this denial of a contradiction between didacticism and entertainment, Brecht wrote "A Short Organum for the Theatre" in 1948, which is seen as either a retreat from his earlier theories or clarification of that which was initially put forth in to simplistic and strident a manner. In "a Short Organum," he writes, "Let us treat the theatre as a place of entertainment ... the theatre set-up's broadest function was to give pleasure," (p. 180). In the "Appendices to the Short Organum," Brecht backs away from or clarifies the notion of epic theatre and its opposition to the dramatic.

If we now discard the concept of EPIC THEATRE we are not discarding the progress made towards conscious experience which it still makes possible. It is just that the concept is too slight and too vague for the kind of theatre intended; it needs exacter definition and must achieve more. Besides, it was too inflexibly opposed to the concept of the dramatic, often just taking it for granted, roughly in the sense that 'of course' it always

embraces incidents that take place directly with all or most of the hallmarks of immediacy.¹ (p. 276)

Both Eric Bentley and Martin Esslin see Brecht the theorist as rigid and dogmatic. However, they see a difference between Brecht the theorist and Brecht the artist. Bentley writes, “The disproof of Brecht’s theory is Brecht’s practice. His art makes up for his criticism. In his art there is stage-illusion, suspense, sympathy, identification. The audience is enthralled and the highly personal genius of Brecht finds expression, (*BC*, p. 47). Esslin writes,

In practice, he succeeded at best in reducing to some extent the emotional identification of the audience with his characters. He never succeeded in evoking the critical attitude he postulated. The audience stubbornly went on being moved to terror and pity.

On the other hand, it is perhaps precisely this contradiction between the author’s and director’s intentions and the audience’s natural tendency to react, which creates the peculiar effect of Brechtian theatre: the conflict between head and heart in the actors and in the spectators, the ambiguity created by the tug of war between the intended and actual reaction of the audience gives depth to two-dimensional characters and sophistication to what was intended to be naïve. ... And so Brecht’s success lies in his partial failure to realize his intentions. (p. 131)

I might add that Brecht’s alienation techniques, which have become commonplace in the theatre, are highly theatrical. Often, they have a visceral rather than an intellectual effect; so that these techniques do enthrall the spectator, not through identification with the characters, but through pure showmanship.

In regards to acting, Brecht was forever qualifying his theories, arguing that it was not emotion he objected to, but the empathy by which both the actor and the audience

¹ It is possible that Brecht’s seeming revision of his theories was an attempt to appease the East German authorities, who espoused the kitschy aesthetics of socialist realism and were hostile to Brecht’s “formalism.” “A Short Organum” was written before Brecht settled in East Germany, but the Appendix was not published until after his death and may well have been written while he was living in East Germany.

identify with the character. In “ A letter to an Actor,” written towards the end of Brecht’s life in 1951, he writes,

Of course the stage of the realistic theatre must be peopled by live, three dimensional, self-contradictory people with all their passions, unconsidered utterances and actions. The stage is not a hothouse or a zoological museum full of stuffed animals. The actor must be able to create such people (and if you could attend our productions you would see them; and they succeed in being people because of our principles, not in spite of them!). (*BOT*, p. 235).

It is by now notorious that the Berliner Ensemble did not necessarily employ epic acting techniques. In his notes to the above letter, John Willett writes, “Regine Lutz, one of [The Berliner Ensemble’s] principal actresses from 1949 on, told me in 1957 that she had never read Brecht’s theoretical works,” (p. 236). Eric Bentley writes, “Brecht holds that the theory cannot be fully practiced until not only the actors, but also the audiences, have had a different training. We see truly “epic” performance only at moments, and these are less frequent in actual performance than in rehearsal,” (*BC*, 69).

With all these qualifications, one wonders whether there ever really was such a thing as epic acting. Eric Bentley reports that there was. “As Mother Courage in Berlin, Helene Weigel probably came as close to Brecht’s idea of acting as anyone has yet come. ... To a degree, Miss Weigel stands outside the role and in a sense does not even look like Mother Courage. She is cool, relaxed and ironical. Yet, with great precision of movement and intonation, she imitates what Mother Courage was like,” (p. 69)

During the same period that the above letter was written, Brecht criticized the epic style of acting: “It is truer to say that at any rate our mistakes are different from those of other theatres. Their actors are liable to display too much spurious temperament; ours

often show too little of the real thing. Aiming to avoid artificial heat, we fall short in natural warmth²,” (*BOT*, p. 248).

Whether Brecht’s work is truly didactic and whether didacticism had an aesthetically detrimental effect on his plays, will be discussed in the next chapter.

² Again, one wonders if this self-criticism is influenced by the displeasure of the East German government, which had a Stanislavskian aesthetic when it came to acting.

Chapter 2 The Didactic and The Tragic

Let me begin with a point on which Brecht and I agree. In “A Short Organum for the Theatre,” Brecht writes that primary purpose of theatre is entertainment or pleasure.

The theatre must in fact remain something entirely superfluous, though this indeed means that it is the superfluous for which we live. Nothing needs less justification than pleasure ... Yet, there are weaker (simple) and stronger (complex) pleasures which the theatre can create. The last named, which are what we are dealing with in great drama, attain their climaxes rather as cohabitation does through love: they are more intricate, richer in communication, more contradictory, and more productive of results. (*BOT*, pp. 180-81)

Among the stronger pleasures for me are ecstasy and transcendence – the visceral sensation of breaking free of one’s subjectivity and dissolving into a larger whole –, the intellectual pleasure of wrestling with complex and ambiguous ideas, and the pleasure of experiencing profound emotion – both positive and negative.

For Brecht the stronger pleasures of theatre are particular to the age in which theatre is produced. He declares that he is living in a scientific age and that the stronger pleasures of theatre are utilitarian and politically transformative. Brecht writes,

In the age to come art will create entertainment from the new productivity which can greatly improve our maintenance, and in itself, may prove to be the greatest pleasure of all ... The attitude [of the scientific age] is a critical one. Faced with a river, it consists in regulating the river; faced with a fruit tree, in spraying the fruit tree; faced with movement, in constructing vehicles and aeroplanes; faced with society, in turning society upside down ... [Theatre] constructs workable representations of society, which are in turn in a position to influence society. (pp. 185-86)

It is here that Brecht and I part company. I wholeheartedly agree with his earlier statement that theatre is superfluous. In my personal experience and in my understanding of history, art is rarely politically efficacious. I can think of only one instance in which a work of art has had a real political impact. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* did, indeed, gain converts

to the cause of abolitionism. I can think of no other examples. Those riots that were inspired by works of art – *Le Sacre du Printemps*, *The Playboy of the Western World*, *The Plough and the Stars* – were not directed against the existing social order, but against the work of art, itself. In most cases, the best an artist can hope for is to confirm the beliefs of those who agree with him/her and offend those who don't.

When an artist attempts to create a work that is politically efficacious, in most cases, he/she creates a weaker rather than a stronger pleasure. For me, the stronger pleasures of art often contain uncertainty: the ecstatic loss of self is often achieved by the destruction of certainties and there is a greater intellectual pleasure in struggling with difficult questions than there is in receiving easy answers. Theatre with a political agenda, more often than not, provides the audience with answers and certainties and asks the audience to act on them.

This is not to say that I believe that art is unimportant. I agree with Brecht that “it is the superfluous for which we live.” Our lives would be infinitely poorer without the stronger pleasures of art. It is for this reason – and the fact that I could not do otherwise – that I have devoted my life to theatre.

Later in “A Short Organum,” Brecht contrasts politically efficacious theatre to Greek Tragedy and Shakespeare³

The Theatre as we know it shows the structure of society (represented on the stage) as incapable of being influenced by society (the auditorium). Oedipus, who offended against certain principles underlying the society of his time, is executed: the gods see to that; they are beyond criticism . Shakespeare's great solitary figures, bearing on their breast the star of their fate, carry through with irresistible force their futile and deadly

³ This is not to say that Brecht does not appreciate the greatness of the Greeks and Shakespeare. In fact, when he criticizes bourgeois theatre, Brecht uses classical and Elizabethan ages as examples of vigorous periods in theatre.

outbursts; they prepare their own downfall; life, not death becomes obscene as they collapse; the catastrophe is beyond criticism. (Ibid.189)

This critique echoes statements from some of Brecht's earlier writings. In *The Threepenny Lawsuit*, he writes,

Fate, which used (once) to be among the great concepts, has long since become a vulgar one, where the desired 'transfiguration' and 'illumination' are achieved by reconciling oneself to circumstances – and, a purely class warfare one, where one class fixes the fate of another. (*BOT*, p. 49)

In "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction," he writes,

The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too – Just like me – It's only natural – it'll never change – The sufferings of this man appal [*sic*] me, because they are inescapable – That's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world – I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.

The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd have never thought it – That's not the way – That's extraordinary, hardly believable – It's got to stop – the sufferings of this man appal [*sic*] me, because they are unnecessary – That's great art: nothing obvious in it – I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh. (Ibid. 71)

What Brecht fails to recognize – or admit – is that reconciling oneself to circumstance is not a function of a given social order – feudalism, capitalism, totalitarianism, etc. – but a fact of life. We all die. We can all be struck by cancer or a truck at any moment. To quote Nietzsche, "the throw of the dice is tragic." Every human being who has lived long enough comes to understand – through gradual disillusionment or a shattering blow – that human free agency is limited by forces beyond humanity's control. Confronting or exploring this aspect of the human condition is one of the stronger pleasures of tragedy. Because this realization is painful, its treatment offers the pleasure of experiencing profound emotion. It can also offer the possibility of the

pleasure of ecstatic transcendence. When the illusion of human power and free agency is destroyed, one is set adrift in the vastness of creation.

Brecht's remarks about *Oedipus* are an oversimplification. It is not clear from the play that Oedipus is justly punished for offending against "certain principles underlying the society of his time" and that the gods are "beyond criticism." Yes, Oedipus is abusive and arrogant in his confrontations with Creon and Tiresias, but that is not his crime. His crime is that he runs from his fate. But who wouldn't run from such a fate – killing one's father and marrying one's mother? For what crime was he assigned that fate to begin with? Are the gods who would predetermine such an end "beyond criticism?" To me, the gods in *Oedipus Tyrannus* are neither good nor evil. They are a fact. Tragedies such as *Oedipus* provide the stronger intellectual pleasure of wrestling with complex and ambiguous ideas.

It is, perhaps, this pleasure that Hegel is focussing on in the theory of tragedy he expostulates in his *Aesthetics*. He writes,

The original essence of tragedy consists then in the fact that within such a conflict each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself has *justification*; while each establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by denying and infringing the equally justified power of the other. The consequence is that in its moral life, and because of it, each is nevertheless involved in guilt. (p. 1196)

Not only is such a clash between two equally justified points of view intellectually challenging, it also touches on the limits of human freedom discussed above. If one can only do right by opposing someone else who is doing right, one can't do right without doing wrong. It is impossible to be wholly good. We are again touching on the great pain of what it means to be human.

This moral ambiguity finds great theatrical expression in Shakespeare's History Plays, to which I have devoted a significant amount of work. In the Major Tetralogy – *Richard II*; *Henry IV, Parts 1 & 2*; and *Henry V* – Henry Bolingbroke does what is necessary for his country and overthrows the irresponsible Richard. He is undoubtedly a better ruler, yet he has committed the crime – and the sin – of usurpation and his country is condemned to decades of civil war. Both he and his son, Henry V, are amoral and Machiavellian, but, at the same time they are effective rulers and, in Henry V's case, heroic and favored by God.

As I will discuss below, Brecht's plays are actually rife with such moral ambiguity. However, it is interesting that, when Brecht adapted *Antigone* – a tragedy which Hegel used as a prime example to support his theory –, he drained it of moral ambiguity.

The background to Sophocles' *Antigone* is as follows. Oedipus' sons Eteocles and Polyneices struggle with each other for the crown of Thebes. Eteocles prevails and expels Polyneices from the city. Polyneices goes to Argos and raises a foreign army to attack Thebes. The Thebans drive off the Argives and Eteocles and Polyneices kill each other. When the play begins Creon has Eteocles buried with full honors and leaves Polyneices' corpse to the dogs and vultures. The main action of the play focuses on Antigone's insistence on burying Polyneices and Creon's sentencing her to death. At no point does Sophocles offer a clear opinion as to which of the two brothers was right. Creon's reasons for honoring Eteocles and not Polyneices are that the former defended his city, whereas the latter brought a foreign army to attack it⁴.

⁴ Sophocles' *Antigone*, however, is not quite as balanced as Hegel would have it. Creon ultimately repents and Sophocles clearly comes down on Antigone's side. Nonetheless, Sophocles gives Creon's point of

Brecht makes significant changes in his adaptation of Sophocles' play. Prior to the start of the action, it is Creon who is king and not Eteocles. Under Creon's leadership Thebes is not fighting a defensive war, but a war of conquest for economic gain – Creon is invading Argos to get their iron ore. Eteocles is killed in battle and Polyneices deserts in horror and protest. Creon has Polyneices killed. By the end of the play, we discover that Creon has brought a false report of victory, The Thebans are driven from Argos and face an Argive invasion.

Brecht's *Antigone* is not a clash between two equally justified "rights" but a clear-cut struggle between right and wrong. In my opinion, it ceases to be a tragedy. In the poetics Aristotle writes,

good men should not be shown passing from prosperity to misery, for this does not inspire fear or pity, it merely disgusts us ... Nor again should an utterly worthless man be seen falling from prosperity into misery. Such a course might indeed play upon our humane feelings, but it would not arouse either fear or pity ... pity for the undeserving sufferer and fear for a man like ourselves. (*CLC*, p.48)

I do not hold with Aristotle that fear and pity are essential elements of tragedy. However, I agree with Aristotle that when an evil man like Brecht's Creon passes prosperity to misery, it is not tragic – it is someone getting his just deserts. As for a wholly good person like Brecht's Antigone, her death is not tragic, but glorious, because she dies in a good fight. Eric Bentley writes of Brecht's Galileo, "If Galileo were tortured, you wouldn't get a tragedy, but, from Brecht's viewpoint, a happy ending, with Galileo a martyr of science." (p. 87).

view more weight than Brecht does. A more ambiguous version of the play was written by Jean Anouilh –

It must be said, however, that Brecht wrote *Antigone* in the wake of World War II and his Creon clearly represents Hitler. Jean Anouilh wrote a much more ambiguous adaptation of *Antigone* in response to the Vichy French Government's collaboration with the Nazis. While, Anouilh's position is not clear – I believe he is understanding of, if not sympathetic to, Creon and, therefore, Vichy –, he certainly does not condemn the collaborators. Moral ambiguity has its limits – it stops with regimes, like the Nazis and the Soviets, who commit mass murder. Brecht has a lot to answer for on that score. However, if his use of *Antigone* to deal with Nazis and their helpers is less interesting than Anouilh's, it is also not as morally questionable.

Eric Bentley writes, “The disproof of Brecht's theory is Brecht's practice.” (p. 47). This raises the question, are Brecht's plays really geared to towards causing political change – are they really didactic – and are those elements of tragedy that Brecht derides in his essays really absent from his plays? As I wrote above, moral ambiguity is certainly not absent from Brecht's plays, it is – with exceptions, such as *Antigone*— everywhere present.⁵

Even one of his plays that he specifically labels a *lehrstucke* – a “learning” or “didactic” play – deals with the Hegelian – and human – dilemma of being unable to do right without doing wrong. *The Measures Taken* tells the story of a communist cell that kills a Young Comrade whose compassion repeatedly leads him to endanger the cell and its mission. In the play Brecht writes of the need to make moral compromises is the service of justice.

however, I believe Anouilh subtly favors Creon.

⁵ Brecht does not specifically attack the moral ambiguity of tragedy. His expressed intention of putting the evils of society on stage so that audience will want to change society suggests a one-sided view of the

With whom would the just man not sit
To help justice?
What medicine is too bitter
For the man who is dying?
What vileness should you not suffer to
Annihilate vileness?
If at last you could change the world, what
Could make you too good to do so?
Who are you?
Sink in filth
Embrace the butcher, but
Change the world: it needs it!
(p. 25)

Brecht's point, that it is necessary to do that which is morally distasteful in the service of a greater good, is the dilemma of Shakespeare's Bolingbroke and Anouilh's Creon. The play is, nonetheless, not tragic, but didactic – as Brecht intended it to be. What makes it didactic is that Brecht does not simply present the characters' predicament, he recommends their decision as a course of action.

The impossibility of doing right without doing wrong is the central theme of *The Good Person of Szechwan*. When the former prostitute Shen Teh tries to help her fellow human beings, she is taken advantage of and brought to the brink of ruin. She, therefore, takes on an alter-ego – her ruthless capitalist cousin, Shui Ta. It is only through Shui Ta's brutality that Shen Teh is able to accomplish any good at all.

Mother Courage and Life of Galileo are morally ambiguous in that the title characters of both plays act in a way that Brecht judges to be wrong, yet they are not wholly unsympathetic. Mother Courage is a provisioner who makes her money off war. Even though that war kills her three children, she goes back to business – she continues living off the war and the war continues living off her. Yet, Tennessee Williams has

existing order. Also, from his remarks on *Oedipus* in "A Short Organum," I infer that he does not appreciate the ambiguity of that play.

commented, “I doubt that any other play has paid such homage to mankind’s greatest virtue, its heroic determination to somehow, almost anyhow, keep on pulling the wagon further on.” (*BC*, p.120).

Galileo recants the Copernican theory of the solar system when threatened with torture by the Inquisition. Yet, although he is kept under house arrest and has promised not to publish such theories, he has his *Discorsi*, espousing the Copernican view, smuggled out. I believe that Brecht is allowing for the possibility that cowardice and dishonesty are often more effective than heroics. Even if he isn’t, Eric Bentley points out that “The action (Galileo smuggling his new book out) is apt, in a theater, to speak louder than mere *words* of denunciation.” (p.193)

Both Mother Courage’s and Galileo’s actions and the force of their personalities counterbalance the criticism of them that is present in the texts of the plays. This creates ambiguity. In this respect, these plays are similar to Shakespeare’s *Henry V*. If you read the play, you find that the majority of Henry’s actions – taking justification for war from a corrupt bishop, using the threat of rape and infanticide as a tactic, killing prisoners – are, at best, morally questionable. To read *Henry V*, one would take it for an anti-war play. Yet, when an audience is confronted with an actor delivering Henry’s speeches, it is nearly impossible not to look on him as heroic. It is in this contradiction that the play’s complexity lies.

A positive alternative to the existing order is not presented in *The Good Person Szechwan*, *Mother Courage*, or *Galileo* – in fact, of Brecht’s major plays, only *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* offers such a vision. Does this mean that Brecht is not actually writing didactic plays? Not necessarily. It could just mean that Brecht is subtler

than Stalin's cultural henchman Zhdanov, who insisted on positive heroes. As was quoted above, Brecht writes that he wants the audience to think, "That's not the way – That's extraordinary, hardly believable – It's got to stop." (*BOT*, p. 71). Brecht's method is to inspire people to change by outraging with the injustice of the world as it is.

Is this actually the effect of Brecht's plays? For most of the major plays, I would argue that the answer is no. At the end of *The Good Person of Szechwan* we are resigned to the necessity of having a little Shui Ta – or Creon or Bolingbroke – in ourselves. In *Galileo*, we see how difficult it is to be heroic in reality and how effective the mixture of cowardice and cunning can be. In *Mother Courage*, we encounter a resignation to the order of things that is simultaneously self-destructive and heroic.

Yet, Brecht's plays are didactic and suffer from the didactic flaw of making points in too obvious a fashion. In *Mother Courage*, Brecht hits the audience over the head with the symbiotic relationship between war and business, using scene titles like "Peace threatens to ruin Mother Courage's business," (*CP*, v. 5, p. 186) and such lines as "Stop running down the war. I won't have it. I know it destroys the weak, but the weak haven't a chance in peacetime either. And war is a better provider." (p. 185). Shakespeare makes similar points much more subtly in *Henry V* by using the profiteering of the comic characters as veiled commentary on Henry, himself.

In *Galileo*, Brecht starts out by making the point that Galileo's proof of the Copernican system will undermine the existing order because it will undermine peoples' faith in the religion that helps them to bear suffering. He acknowledges that the loss of faith will be painful, but argues that the liberation it will bring about is worth the pain. Later in the carnival scene, Brecht has a starving couple use the discovery that the sun

does not revolve around the earth to deduce that the poor no longer have to revolve around the mighty. They sing,

Up stood learned Galileo
(Chucked the Bible, pulled out his telescope, and took a
look at the universe)
And told the sun: Stand still!
From this time on, the wheels
Shall turn the other way.
Henceforth the mistress, ho!
Shall turn around the maid.
(Ibid. p. 71)

Brecht's first point is a plausible interpretation of the history of the progress of science. It is presented with complexity and compassion, because it acknowledges the suffering caused by the loss of faith. Brecht's latter point seems to me implausible – I would have to study the carnivals which took Galileo's discoveries as a theme, to see if Brecht's scene is accurate – and it has replaced a thoughtful analysis with crude revolutionary rhetoric.

Brecht revised *Galileo* after Hiroshima and Nagasaki to make the point that scientists must limit their studies to that which is socially useful or they may create abominations such as the atom bomb. He has Galileo say,

What end are you scientists working for? To my mind, the only purpose of science is to lighten the toil of human existence. If scientists, browbeaten by selfish rulers, confine themselves to the accumulation of knowledge for the sake of knowledge, science will be crippled and your new machines will only mean new hardships. Given time, you may well discover everything there is to discover, but your progress will be a progression away from humanity. The gulf between you and humanity may one day be so wide that the response to your exultation about some new achievement will be a universal cry of horror. (p. 94)

The flaws in this speech are many. Galileo was not guilty of inventing something horrific, but of recanting what he knew to be the truth. Weapons of mass destruction and

machinery that worsens the lot of workers are not created by “the accumulation of knowledge for the sake of knowledge” but by the accumulation of knowledge for economic and military gain. And Brecht’s condemnation of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake smacks of a Stalinist hostility to freedom of thought.

The statement that “the only purpose of science is to lighten the burden of existence” is an expression of Brecht’s utilitarianism. This utilitarianism is the one of the major themes of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and is summed up in the play’s closing verses,

Things should belong to those who do well by them
Children to the motherly that they may thrive
Wagons to the drivers that they may be well driven
And the valley to those who water it, that it may bear fruit.
(*CP*. v. 7, p. 229)

This utilitarianism reminds me both of socialist realist movies in which heroic tractor factory workers exceed their quotas and of Stalin’s justification for the forced collectivization of the farms.

Brecht’s didacticism mars *Mother Courage*, *Galileo*, and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. He makes his political points more subtly and ambiguously in *The Good Person of Szechwan*. *The Threepenny Opera*, however, does make political points in a very obvious way. Yet, to my mind it does not suffer for doing so. Why? There is nothing subtle about the lyrics,

What keeps mankind alive? The fact that millions
Are daily tortured, stifled, punished, silenced, oppressed.
(*CP*, p.117)

In *Threepenny Opera*, as in all the major works except *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Brecht does not present a positive alternative to the existing order. Peachum, the

character who makes the sharpest critiques of bourgeois society, does not seek to change that society, he simply exploits it. As usual Brecht avoids the crude propagandistic tactic of presenting an idealized opposition to capitalism – or, for that matter, any opposition at all. Is Brecht trying to arouse our indignation and inspire us to action by simply showing us a brutal world? One of the last lyrics of the play is “Be not too keen to persecute injustice” (RM, p. 62), which can be seen as both an admonition against prosecuting criminals and an admonition against revolutionary fervor. The play is ambiguous.

Like many tragedies, *Threepenny* depicts a world in which it is impossible to do good. The Peachums sing,

PEACHUM

Let's practice goodness: who would disagree?
But sadly on this planet while we're waiting
The means are meagre and the morals low.
To get one's record straight would be elating
But our condition's such it can't be so.

POLLY AND MRS, PEACHUM

So that is all there is to it.
The world is poor and man's a shit.
(CP, p.95)

It's not surprising that *Threepenny* has something in common with tragedy. *Threepenny* is a satire and both tragedy and satire are ironic. The essence of Sophocles' *Oedipus* is contained in the famous ironic parable from which John O'Hara took the title of his novel *Appointment in Samara*.

A man sees Death in the marketplace. The man goes up to a friend and says, “Death has come for me. I'm leaving here and going to Samara.”

After the man leaves, Death comes up to his friend and says, “That man you were talking to, he shouldn't be here. Tomorrow he and I have an appointment in Samara.”

Not only does the fact that *Threepenny* is a satire explain its tragic outlook, it enables it to have its didactic moments without suffering aesthetically. Satire is more pointed than possibly any other form of literature — it requires direct attacks. This past summer I taught George Orwell's *Animal Farm* to middle school students. As I explained to the students the historical figures the animals represented, I felt it necessary to say that this kind of clear-cut allegory – Napoleon represents Stalin, Snowball represents Trotsky, Mr. Frederick represents Germany, Mr. Pilkington represents England, etc. – would be too obvious and would probably be bad writing in another kind of novel. But, *Animal Farm* is a satire and it has to make its targets clear. The same is true for *Threepenny*.

Tragedy is one of the stronger pleasures for which I live. In his theoretical writings Brecht sets himself in opposition to the tragic outlook. He wants to create a theatre that is not about resigning oneself to circumstances, but which leads people to think critically and inspires them to change the world. Brecht's plays contain more of a tragic outlook than his theoretical writings would lead one to believe. Many of his greatest characters capitulate to the world as it is, and these characters and their actions are not wholly unsympathetic. Many of Brecht's plays have a moral ambiguity that one does not associate with didactic theatre. Nonetheless, Brecht's work does contain a didacticism that is crude and obvious, and it suffers for it. *The Threepenny Opera* is an exception to this rule. In it, Brecht's barbed polemics are part of the play's wickedly funny cynicism. Martin Esslin writes, "the Brechtian theatre is a theatre designed to arouse indignation in the audience, dissatisfaction, a realization of contradictions – it is a theatre supremely fitted for parody, caricature and denunciation." (p. 133)

Chapter 3 Brecht and Stalinism

Ruth Fischer, a former head of the German Communist Party (KPD) who was removed by Stalin, dubbed Brecht a “Minstrel of the GPU⁶” (*LLBB*, p. 448). Eric Bentley writes of Brecht’s “readiness to excuse Stalinist brutality,” (p. 99). In a review of John Fuegi’s sensationalistic and hostile biography of Brecht, Erica Munk laments, “unfortunately there was nothing tacit about [Brecht’s] complicity with Stalinism,” (p. 503).

It is known that Brecht considered himself a Marxist and aligned himself with Soviet communism and that he ended his days running a state-subsidized theatre in East Germany. However, these charges of Stalinism raise several questions. Was Brecht ideologically an anti-democratic communist? Did he know what was going on in the Soviet Union? Was he wholly uncritical of Soviet and East German communism?

Although Brecht began to identify himself as a Marxist in 1926 after his collaborator Elisabeth Hauptmann suggested he read *Das Kapital*, and while he identified himself with the Communists rather than with the more moderate German Social Democratic Party (SPD), Brecht is not known to have ever joined the KPD. In fact, when he testified before the House Committee on Un-American Activities while he was living in the United States, he denied ever having joined. When asked about the political make-up of the Council for a Democratic Germany⁷, the German expatriate theologian Paul Tillich joked, “We have two and one half Communist representatives on the council. The half is Bert Brecht,” (*LLBB*, 444). Although Tillich was not the only one to doubt the

⁶ Forerunner of the KGB

⁷ An expatriate group to which Brecht belonged while he was living in the U.S.

seriousness of Brecht's communism, Brecht's not being a member of the KPD does not necessarily reflect a lack of commitment on his part. It was common practice for communist parties to specifically ask well-known artists not to join, so that they could remain as useful links to mainstream liberals and leftists.

Whether or not Brecht was actually a member of the KPD, he expresses what could be described a Leninist ideology in his 1930 play *The Measures Taken*. As was described in the previous chapter, the play is about a communist cell that kills a Young Comrade whose compassion repeatedly leads him to endanger the cell and its mission. Before they kill him, the Young Comrade says the other members of the cell are doing the right thing. In this play, Brecht clearly shows that he is not a sentimental liberal or reformist, but a revolutionary who believes the ends justifies the means. I say this is Leninist rather than Stalinist because the ends are not necessarily totalitarian.

Yet, Martin Esslin argues that Brecht was prescient about the totalitarian nightmare to come.

[*The Measures Taken*] written in 1930, is an exact and horrifying anticipation of the great confession trials of the Stalinist era. Many years before Bukharin consented to his own execution in front of his judges, Brecht had given the act of self-sacrifice for the sake of the party its great, tragic expression. With the intuition of a poet he had grasped the real problem of Communist discipline with all its far-reaching implications. To this day [*The Measures Taken*] remains the only great tragedy on the moral dilemma of Soviet Communism. (p.144)

Was Brecht aware of the horror Esslin argues he predicted and did he believe that the Purges, like the killing of the Young Comrade, were necessary? Among those arrested were several friends and colleagues of Brecht's: Carola Neher, the original Polly Peachum in *The Threepenny Opera*; the playwright Sergei Tretiakov; the director Asja

Lazis; the dramaturge Bernhard Reich; the Soviet publisher Mikhial Koltsov. That Brecht was aware of these arrests is clear from a 1939 diary entry.

Koltsov also arrested in Moscow. My last Russian connection with over there. Nobody knows anything about Tretiakov, who is supposed to be a 'Japanese spy.' Nobody knows anything about Neher, who is supposed to have gotten involved in Prague with her husband in some Trotskyist business. Reich and Asja Lazis don't write anymore. Grete⁸ doesn't get any answers from her acquaintances in the Caucasus and in Leningrad. Also Béla Kun⁹ has been arrested, the one politician I saw there. Meyerchold has lost his theater ... Literature and art have been turned to shit, political theory has gone to the dogs, and what we see is an officiously propagated proletarian humanism that is thin and bloodless. (LLBB, p. 371)

Clearly Brecht is expressing doubts about the Soviet Union in his diary. He also expressed doubts in a poem he wrote about the death of Tretiakov, titled "Are the People Infallible."¹⁰

1

My teacher
Who was great, who was kind
Has been shot, sentenced by a People's Court.
As a spy. His name has been condemned
His books have been annihilated. Conversation about him
Is suspect and subsided.
Suppose he is innocent?

2

The sons of the people have found him guilty.
The collective farms and factories of the workers
The most heroic institutions in the world
Have found in him an enemy
No voice was raised on his behalf.
Suppose he is innocent?

3

The people have many enemies.

⁸ Grette Steffin, one of Brecht's collaborators.

⁹ Hungarian Marxist

¹⁰ The poem is reproduced in Bentley's *The Brecht Commentaries*. Bentley does not say whether the poem was published in Brecht's lifetime. All the authors I have read on the subject of Brecht and Stalinism concur that Brecht never publicly criticized the Soviet Union and that all his writings expressing doubt were published after his death.

In the highest positions
Sit enemies. In the most useful laboratories
Sit enemies. They build
Canals and dams for the good of whole continents and the canals
Clog up the dams
Collapse. The man in charge must be shot.
Suppose he is innocent?

4

The enemy walks in disguise.
He draws a workers cap down over his face. His friends
Know him for a zealous worker. His wife
Displays the holes in his shoes:
He went through his shoes in the service of the people.
And yet he is an enemy. Was my teacher such a man?
Suppose he is innocent?

5

To speak about enemies who may be sitting in the courts of the people
Is dangerous. For the courts have to be respected.
To demand papers with the proofs of guilt on them in black and white
Is senseless. For there need not be any such papers.
Criminals hold proofs of their innocence in their hands.
The innocent often have no proofs.
Is it best, then, to be silent?
Suppose he is innocent?

6

What 5000 have built, one man can destroy.
Among 50 who are sentenced
One may be innocent.
Suppose he is innocent?

7

On the supposition that he is innocent
What will he be thinking as he goes to his death?
(*BC*, pp. 170-71)

By the end of the poem, Brecht's doubts are resolved. The Party has many enemies and must be vigilant. Better that one innocent man die, than fifty enemies of the Party go undiscovered. If Tretiakov is innocent, he will be thinking, like the Young Comrade, that his death is necessary.

Brecht also expresses doubts in a book he wrote in the Thirties, but which was not published until after his death. In *Me-ti. Book of Twists and Turns*, Brecht adopts the persona of Me-ti, a Chinese philosopher. It is an allegory for the Soviet Union, which is referred to as Su. Lenin is represented by Mi-en-leh and Stalin by Ni-en. Of the Purge Trials, Brecht writes,

Me-ti expressed his disapproval of Ni-en because in his trials against his enemies in the association he demanded too much confidence from the people. He said: If I am asked to believe something which can be proven (without furnishing me the proof) that is tantamount to my being asked to believe something that *cannot* be proven. Ni-en *might* have benefited the people by removing his enemies inside the association, but he *did* not prove it. By conducting trials without proof he has done damage to the people. He ought to have taught the people to demand proof ... (BACE, P. 156)

In another section Brecht expresses his disapproval of Stalin in general.

Mi-en-leh believed before the great revolution that workers would help the citizens to free themselves from the rule of the Emperor. ... Later the workers, under his leadership obtained power; but his successor Ni-en acted exactly like an Emperor. (p.156)

However, in other parts of *Me-ti*, Brecht ambiguously refers to Ni-en as “the useful one,” (*MIDT*, p. 210).

There has been much debate as to whether Brecht was criticizing Stalin and the Purge Trials in *Galileo*. In his biography of Trotsky, Issac Deustcher writes that Galileo represents the purge victims, like Bukharin and Zinoviev, who made false confessions before they were sentenced and executed (*BC*, pp. 202-203). According to John Fuegi, Brecht privately told Werner Miitenzwei¹¹ that the play was, indeed, about the Purge Trials (Feugi,368-369). Eric Bentley, however, does not accept Deustcher’s argument.

¹¹ Fuegi does not identify Miitenzwei.

Knowing the subject-matter of the play without actually reading it, it is easy to believe Deutscher's interpretation. The Inquisition, with its insistence on the acceptance of dogma, seems a perfect metaphor for the Stalinists and Galileo's forced recantation is strikingly similar to the forced confessions of the Moscow Trial defendants. However, when I read the play, I found that Brecht so strongly identifies the Church with the ruling classes – ecclesiastical, aristocratic, and capitalist – that it is hard to accept it as a symbol for the Communist Party. If Brecht is attacking the Purge Trials, the attack is heavily veiled. However, Hannah Arendt reports, "After the war, no matter what the Berliner Ensemble tried to do, whenever *Galileo* was staged in East Berlin, every line sounded like an open declaration of hostility to the regime, and was understood as such," (p. 245).

When Brecht was in New York for the Theatre Union's production of *The Mother*, the socialist philosopher Sidney Hook – whose anti-Stalinism would eventually lead him to defend McCarthyism – expressed his doubts about the guilt of Purge Trial defendants to Brecht. Hook reported that Brecht said "The more innocent they are, the more they deserve to die," (*LLBB*, p. 338). This seems to be a horrifyingly callous statement on Brecht's part – and it may well be. However, Arendt offers another interpretation of the remark: "precisely because they had not conspired against Stalin, and were innocent of the 'crime,' there was some justice in the injustice," (p. 227). Arendt's interpretation is, of course, speculative, and we will never know whether Brecht's statement was as objectionable as it sounds or if it contained a hidden meaning.

If Brecht's remark to Hook was an attack on Stalin, it was veiled. If *Galileo* is an allegory for the Purge Trials, it too is veiled. Neither *Me-ti* nor Brecht's diary entries were published in his lifetime. Brecht never spoke out publicly against the Purges. The

German emigré Walter Held published an open letter to Brecht in a Parisian Trotskyist journal. In the letter, Held writes, “You Herr Brecht, knew Carola Neher. You know that she is neither a terrorist nor a spy, but rather was a brave human being and a great artist. Why do you remain silent?” (*LLBB*, 364).

Brecht had been living in Denmark since Hitler had assumed dictatorial powers following the *Reichstag* fire. As Hitler conquered more and more of Europe in 1941, Brecht escaped to the United States via the Soviet Union – which Hitler was about to invade, thereby ending the Stalin-Hitler Pact. Brecht lived in the United States until 1947, continuing to refrain from public criticism of the Soviet Union – the United States was also refraining from such criticism, now that Russia was an ally. Shortly after he was called before HUAC, Brecht left the United States and settled in Switzerland. In 1948 he received an offer to settle in the Soviet sector of East Germany, where he would be given a theatre. After much hesitation and a trial visit – to mount a Soviet funded production of *Mother Courage* –, Brecht accepted the offer.

Once in East Germany Brecht was given his theatre, which was lavishly subsidized, along with other privileges. His stipend at the Berliner Ensemble was roughly ten times that of the average Ensemble worker (*LLBB*, p. 546). In addition to this, Brecht made money off the rights to his plays, which he had handled by a West German publisher. With this money he was able to buy a country estate (*Ibid.* p. 534) and rent two separate apartments when he and his wife Helene Weigel were having marital difficulties (*Ibid.* p. 557).

Any illusion that the East German Government was operating in the interests of the workers was shattered on June 16th, 1953. Workers began demonstrating to protest

increases in work quotas – called norms. These disorganized protests soon came to include demands for democracy. On June 17th, Soviet tanks were sent in to break up the demonstrations. The workers resisted. Some were killed and wounded and thousands were arrested.

On June 17th, Brecht sent a letter to Walter Ulbricht – The head of the Socialist Unity Party (SED)¹², which Brecht claimed balanced criticism with support of the regime. In all the books I have consulted only one paragraph is reproduced. It reads,

History will pay its respect the revolutionary impatience of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany. Large-scale discussions with the masses on the subject of the tempo at which socialism is being built would lead to a recognition and consolidation of socialist achievements. I need to express to you at this time my allegiance with the Socialist Unity Party of Germany. (Ibid. pp. 543-44)

Of this paragraph, Ulbricht had only the last sentence published in the party organ *Neues Deutschland*. According to the Swiss journalist Gody Suter, Brecht once showed him the full text of the letter, “That was the only time I have seen him helpless, almost small as he pulled out of his pocket the original – obviously well-thumbed and produced many times – of that letter,” (Ibid. p. 547). Whether the letter consisted of that one paragraph or whether there was more to it is unclear. This paragraph does contain, in tortuous language, the suggestion that the government have a dialogue with the workers. However, Brecht was equivocating and being too clever by half and Ulbricht used this to his advantage and Brecht’s detriment. Brecht’s statement of solidarity with the SED gave Ulbricht the public support of an internationally respected artist and damaged Brecht’s reputation with liberals and democratic leftists. Suter aptly sums up what happened,

of that whole long clever piece of writing only the one sentence, which had been of no importance to Brecht, remained. The red pencil of the

¹² The party formed when the Soviets forced the SPD in East Germany to merge with KPD

party line had destroyed his cunning design and mercilessly exposed the poet, and turned him, in the eyes of the West, into a loyal henchman of executioners. His independent position, the platform of a kind of 'inner opposition,' was suddenly revealed as a grotesque illusion; a well-aimed blow by the party's paw had smashed the reputation Brecht had built up for himself in long patient efforts. (*BACE*, p.170).

Two days after Ulbricht published the final sentence of the letter, Brecht published the following statement in *Neues Deutschland*,

As it became clear to me on the morning of June 17 that the demonstration of workers was being misused for the purposes of war¹³, I expressed my allegiance to the Socialist Unity Party. I hope, now that the provocateurs have been isolated and their communication network destroyed, that workers who demonstrated in legitimate dissatisfaction are not placed on the same level, in order that the necessary, widespread discussion of mistakes made on every side will not be destroyed before they have begun. (*LLBB*, p. 547)

In another poem that was not published until after Brecht's death, Brecht comments on the uprising,

After the uprising of June 17
The secretary of the Writers Union
Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee¹⁴
In which it was said that the people
Had lost the government's confidence
Which it would only be able to regain
By redoubling its efforts. In that case, would it
Not be simpler if the government dissolved the people
And elected another?
(*Ibid.* p. 549)

Why did Brecht write the letter in the first place? It is possible that he was genuinely trying to urge change in a manner that was palatable to the Party. Gunter Grass implies in his play *The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising* that Brecht had to write an expression of support of the government to safeguard his life and the new theatre that the government was about to give the Berliner Ensemble. In the play Grass has the Brecht

¹³ The Party claimed that the demonstrations were the work of Western agents.

character write the letter instead of signing a declaration of support for the government by the intelligentsia. However, Grass does view the letter as equivocating. He has the Brecht character's dramaturge say, "And even uncut it's feeble. Did you really write this? It's feeble, it's embarrassing," (p. 107).

On February 25th, 1956, Nikita Khrushchev made his famous speech to the Twentieth Party Congress denouncing Stalin. A thaw followed which emboldened the Philosopher Wolfgang Harich to organize opposition to the Stalinist leadership of East Germany. Brecht, who never publicly supported the group, died on August 14th. Harich claimed that "Brecht sympathized with our group up to the time of his death," (*BACE*, p.178). After the Soviets crushed the Hungarian Revolution in October, Harich was arrested and sentenced to ten years penal servitude. Martin Esslin writes, "Would Brecht have been among those were arrested and tried, like Harich, and among whom were many of his pupils and friends. Probably not. He was far too cautious and unheroic to have left any clear evidence of his being implicated with such foolhardy young people," (pp.178-79).

Both John Fuegi (p.598) and Martin Esslin (p. 179) report that shortly before his death Brecht was translating *Poems for Adults*, by the Polish anti-Stalinist poet Adam Wazyk. However, Fuegi adds that the translation was "for the desk drawer," (p. 598).

Why did Brecht never publicly speak out against the Purges? Why did he choose to settle in East Germany and then only criticize the regime in evasive doubletalk and poems "for the desk drawer?" He cannot claim willful naiveté, as many American Communists have; his personal connection to many of the Purge victims and his diary entry makes it clear that he knew what was going on. Brecht was living in Denmark at

¹⁴ Where the demonstrations began.

the time of the Purges, so he didn't have to fear arrest by the NKVD¹⁵, if he spoke out. It is possible that he feared that Hitler would conquer Scandinavia and he needed to keep the Soviet Union as a possible place of refuge – he did, indeed, use it as his escape route to the United States. Nonetheless, he was not in the same danger as those who lived in the Soviet Union. As for accepting the Soviet offer of a theatre in East Germany, Brecht had been denied entrance into West Germany by the American authorities and had not yet been granted Austrian citizenship – which he would eventually get and which he would keep as a means of escape from East Germany, if necessary – so, the Soviet offer was his only option if he wanted to live in a German-speaking country.

Brecht is supposed to have said of the East and the West, “they are both whores, but the eastern whore is pregnant,” (*LLBB*, 499). In other words, Brecht may have believed that there was a hope that the East European communist states could evolve into truly just societies. Martin Esslin argues that Brecht's

dilemma was the dilemma of the Hungarian writers, the Polish intellectuals, and all the other ‘liberal’ elements within the Communist world. They fight against what they consider to be distortions of the true ideal of social justice by petty bureaucrats, cancerous growths of the apparatus of power that should have withered away; and they cannot believe that such distortions could not be quite easily corrected. (pp.180-81).

Esslin also suggests that, in the particular case of East Germany, Brecht thought there were too many Nazis in Germany who would use democratic means to return to power. Esslin quotes Brecht as saying to a friend, “for democracy, you need democrats,” (p.175).

It is also possible that Brecht's Marxism was authoritarian; that he was not a democrat or, at least, that he valued economic justice more than democracy and civil

¹⁵ Another forerunner of the KGB.

liberties. If this was the case, he might have found the arrests, torture, and killings under Soviet and East German communism excessive, but he would not have had a problem with the undemocratic nature of the system. *The Measures Taken* suggests this, as does *Days of the Commune*. Written in 1949, the play attributes the defeat of the Paris Commune to its refusal initiate a civil war and to suspend the civil liberties of its enemies. In it, one of the Commune deputies argues, “Terror against terror; oppress or you’ll be oppressed. Crush or they will crush you,” (p. 75). Another deputy asks about freedom of the press, “To publicise [*sic*] opinions of all kinds against us? Is there a guaranteed freedom to spread lies?” and about free elections, “do we permit the free election of rogues and hypocrites – by an electorate confused by the pressures of schools, churches, press and politicians?” (p.80).

This interpretation of Brecht’s beliefs is supported by a conversation Eric Bentley reports having with Brecht’s collaborator and lover, Ruth Berlau, in Munich in 1950.

“Brecht wants me to sound you out,” [says Berlau]...”why aren’t you one of us?
“Us?” [asks Bentley]
“Oh, you know what I mean. I’m not afraid of the word! Communism! Or just antifascism if you want to call it that! “Why aren’t you?”
“Well, I am ... sort of ... partly ... All my best friends ...”
“Pah, we’ve read your book! And don’t you have a new piece saying Brecht would be a better writer if he gave up Marxism?”
“Not exactly, what I said was ...”
“We know what you said. We are asking you if you are ever going to change!”
“Change?”
“Yes, change. Brecht says, if all these rumors are true, and the Russians are about to take over West Germany, it’ll be very good for Bentley, because they’ll carry him off to Moscow and reeducate him. He’ll learn a lot!”
“You’re joking.”
“Oh no ... If you’re antifascist, progressive, why aren’t you consistent ... why don’t you follow through?”

“Well, Ruth, where to begin? One of my closest friends, Arnold Kettle, before I even met Brecht, was a communist. Arnold and I argued all the time ...”

“About what? What couldn’t he satisfy you on?”

“Oh, the usual stuff – the Moscow Trials ...”

... “Du ist so dumm – you are so dumb! Ignorant, too! What do *you* know about the Moscow Trials?”

“Well, I did look into them. And I didn’t think they were on the level!”

“That’s it, then. I have to tell you this: you can *never* represent Brecht in America, while you represent reactionary views, while you are ... on the other side of the fight!”

(pp. 291-292)

Another explanation is that Brecht’s behavior was motivated by a mixture of cowardice and opportunism. Eric Bentley points out that while Brecht wrote against the Nazis from the safety of exile, he did not actually fight against the Nazis. “He was by no means silent, but he knew how to take care of himself. He did not volunteer in Spain. He did not go to Moscow to risk his neck at the headquarters of the Revolution,” (p.204). As for opportunism, he went to East Germany when the Soviet authorities offered him a theatre.

Both cowardice and opportunism could explain Brecht’s silence when he was living in East Germany. Cowardice could partially explain his silence about the Purges while he was living in Scandinavia. Neither explains his continued silence once he got to America.

What do we know about Brecht’s attitudes and behavior in regards to Stalinism? *The Measures Taken* advocates ruthlessness for the sake of the Revolution. *Days of the Commune* questions the compatibility of democracy and revolution. Brecht knew his friends were disappearing during the Purges, and while Brecht criticized the Show Trials and Stalin in unpublished writings – and possibly in disguised form in *Galileo* – he maintained a public silence. He was given a well-funded theater and privileges by the

Soviets and the East German government. He responded to the workers uprising of June, 1953 with a mixture of mild, obfuscating criticism and support for the regime. He again privately criticized the East German and Soviet regimes, and again maintained a public silence.

Martin Esslin best sums up my political judgement of Brecht. "By accepting the East German Government's offer he put himself at the disposal of one of the most cruel and heartless regimes in history and must bear his share of responsibility for it," (p.181).

Chapter 4

The Threepenny Opera

Questions of Authorship

In 1994, John Fuegi, founder of the International Brecht Society, published *Brecht and Company: Sex, Politics, and the Making of Modern Drama*. In 1995, it was republished in Great Britain under the title *The Life and Lies of Bertolt Brecht*. The Book's thesis is twofold. First, that Brecht's collaborators – three of whom were his lovers – often made greater contributions to Brecht's plays than they were given credit for and that, in some cases, they actually wrote more of a play than Brecht did. Second, that Brecht was a charismatic and destructive personality, like Hitler – whom Fuegi contends Brecht did not do enough to oppose – and Stalin – whom Brecht supported, at least with his silence – ,who held an unnatural sway over those he exploited. Brecht's behavior in regards to Stalin is the subject of the previous chapter. While Brecht may not have been the most courageous of anti-Nazis, I think Fuegi overstates the case in regards to Hitler. The subject of Brecht's charismatic personality is sensationalistic and not a concern of this paper. Nor is the entire subject of Brecht's crediting his collaborators a concern. This brief chapter will focus on the authorship of *The Threepenny Opera*.

The accepted version of the writing of *The Threepenny Opera* is that Brecht's collaborator Elisabeth Hauptmann read John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, translated it into German and suggested Brecht read with an eye towards adapting it, which Brecht did. Hauptmann is credited as the translator and Brecht as the adapter. Fuegi contends that Brecht was uninterested in *The Beggar's Opera* when Hauptmann recommended it to him. However, when the producer Ernst Josef Aufricht approached Brecht looking for a script, but was uninterested in anything Brecht had to offer, Brecht said he could show

him an adaptation of *The Beggar's Opera* he had been working on. The next day Brecht gave him what Hauptmann had written – which had by now evolved from a translation into an adaptation. Brecht would sign a contract – which assigned him 62.5 percent of the income from the play, Kurt Weill 25 percent, and Hauptmann 12.5 percent – for a play 80 percent of which had been written by Hauptmann. Fuegi presents his argument as follows

Felix Bloch Erben's¹⁶ original hectographically reproduced version of this text has survived. It is currently part of the holdings of the old East Berlin Academy of Arts, where it is still treated as though it were a Brecht text. But when American Scholar Ronald K. Schull and East German scholar Joachim Luchessi took a close look at the original typescript, they saw it “relied heavily on Gay's original piece including the retention of a number of song texts of Gay's in Hauptmann's translation.”

Given the existence of this text, plus the fact that Hauptmann was the only person in the workshop to render such complex English into equally complex German, there can be little doubt that *at least* 80 percent of the fabric of the work that Felix Bloch Erben would soon globally market was hers. Both in a published article and in a recent interview with me, Klaus Volker, one of the most knowledgeable people in the world on the Brecht circle told me it was his view that “Elisabeth Hauptmann was responsible for as much as 80 or even 90 percent of the published text of *The Threepenny Opera*.” Though, later, Brecht would work on the text and contribute songs primarily taken from other authors, though the lyrics of the song “Mack the Knife” are almost certainly wholly his, the fact remains that the text bought by Aufrecht and later sold to Felix Bloch Erben was almost exclusively written by Elisabeth Hauptmann. (pp. 195-96)

In 1995, John Willett, James K. Lyon, and Hans Christian Norregaard, challenged the accuracy of some of Fuegi's assertions in *The Brecht Year Book 20*. Here is their response to the above passage.¹⁷

As there is *no* original script, there is uncertainty from the start with regard to the changes which Hauptmann may have made in translating Gay's

¹⁶ The agent with Brecht signed a contract for *The Threepenny Opera*.

¹⁷ Despite the fact that Willett, Lyon and Norregaard seem to be working from same edition as I, the page number they give does not match the passages they refute.

English; as also to the preliminary work Brecht is said to have done on the first two scenes¹⁸, the wording of the original script seen and accepted by Aufricht in March or April of 1928 and the degree of revision it underwent before being duplicated by the agents Bloch-Erben to make the earliest text we now have. Certainly F. provides *no* evidence to show that Hauptmann had done more before its acceptance than to make a straight translation of Gay's original, and from the duplication onwards the additions, revisions, cuts, and story changes by the various collaborators came thick and fast until finally *only* Peachum's "Morning Hymn" remained of Gay's songs and almost nothing of his dialogue. Much of this was collective work, and F. has discovered *no* means of distinguishing the individual contributions, let alone quantifying the different degrees of final responsibility as he pretends to do. (p.292)

Willet, Lyon and Norregaard make three significant points. While the script reproduced by Felix Bloch-Erben exists, the one Brecht showed to Aufricht does not, therefore we cannot know whether there are differences between the two. Fuegi offers no evidence that Hauptmann had done anything more than translate *The Beggars Opera* – it is, however, unclear whether they are referring to the text Brecht showed to Aufricht or the Felix Bloch-Erben text. Their emphasizing the fact the only Gay song that remained by the time *The Threepenny Opera* opened on August 31st, 1928 was "Peachum's Morning Hymn," turns Fuegi's quoting of Luchessi as saying that the Felix Bloch-Erben text, "relied heavily on Gay's original piece including the retention of a number of song texts of Gay's in Hauptmann's translation," into evidence against that text being an adaptation as opposed to a translation. Finally, they make the point that there is no way of determining who – Brecht, Hauptmann, Weill, Engel, etc. – made the changes that occurred between Felix Bloch-Erben's reproduction and the play that opened on August 31st, 1928.

¹⁸ It is not clear if it is Fuegi who said Brecht had done preliminary work on the first two scenes or whether the authors are referring to sources other than Fuegi. I can find no such reference in Fuegi's book.

The Felix Bloch-Erben reproduction does exist, but while Fuegi specifies that that text contains significant portions of Hauptmann's translation of Gay's play, neither Fuegi nor his critics says whether any changes have been made from Gay's original. However, in the collection of essays on *The Threepenny Opera* that he edited, Stephen Hinton does say, "the pre-rehearsal text cyclostyled by Bloch-Erben already represents a considerable transformation of the English original," (P.21). Nonetheless, it seems difficult to determine who made these departures.

Fuegi offers two pieces of evidence in favor of Hauptmann. First, that Brecht did not have the skills to translate Gay's English and, second, that Brecht had shown no interest in the project prior to his meeting Aufricht, therefore text he showed Aufricht had to be Hauptmann's and that this was the same text reproduced by Bloch-Erben.

As for the differences between the Bloch-Erben reproduction and the production script, Fuegi writes in a letter to *The New York Times Book Review* that what he calls "the Hauptmann text" "already contains nine of the eighteen songs that were in the work as performed in 1928. This still extant manuscript has not only half the songs, but 80 percent of the racy text of 'Threepenny' as played in 1928 and today," (p. 43). Ironically he is backed up in this by John Willett, who – along with his collaborator in translating Brecht, Ralph Manheim – is quoted by Stephen Hinton. While they do not corroborate the figure of 80 percent, Willett and Manheim do confirm the presence of the nine songs as well as several departures from Gay that would make it into the text that Brecht published in 1931 (p. 22).

As, for Brecht's disinterest in the project before meeting Aufricht, in his book, Fuegi cites Werner Mittenzwei as the source of this claim (p.643), and the letter to the

The Book Review refers to “several eyewitness accounts from the period,” (p. 43). It seems to me that this evidence is – to use a legal term – hearsay.

Whether it is likely that the script was altered between the time it was shown to Aufrecht and when it was reproduced by Bloch-Erben depends on how much time elapsed between Brecht’s showing Aufrecht the script and his giving a copy to Bloch-Erben. Brecht signed a contract with Bloch-Erben on April 26th, 1928, (*KWTPO*, p. 20; *LLBB*, p.195). Fuegi writes that Aufrecht approached Brecht in the middle of April (p. 195). However, Stephen Hinton cites a letter dated March 10th, 1928, to Weill from his publisher, which reads “learn from a newspaper notice that you are preparing with Brecht an adaptation of *The Beggars Opera*,” (P.18). Fuegi writes that when Brecht showed Aufrecht the script, he suggested Weill as composer (p.195). Hinton quotes Aufrecht as saying that Brecht told him “that a musician was involved, Kurt Weill,”¹⁹(P.17). Either way, the letter strongly suggests – and probably proves – that by March 10th, either Brecht had had his meeting with Aufrecht and given him the script or that Brecht and Weill had, at least, discussed the project prior to Brecht’s meeting with Aufrecht. Therefore, either there was ample time for Brecht to adapt the script he had shown Aufrecht before he gave a copy to Bloch-Erben or Brecht had shown enough interest in the project to talk to Weill before he was approached by Aufrecht.

This does not rule out the possibility that Hauptmann did more than just translate *The Beggar’s Opera*, however, it suggests that Fuegi’s contention is, at best, speculative.

¹⁹ However, Hinton and Willett and Manheim both write that Aufrecht’s account contains inaccuracies.

SECTION II

The Threepenny Opera An Interpretation

For me, the thrust of *The Threepenny Opera* is contained in *The Second Threepenny Finale*. Ralph Manheim and John Willett translate the refrain as,

What Keeps mankind alive? The fact the millions
Are daily tortured, stifled, punished, silenced, oppressed.
Mankind can keep alive thanks to its brilliance
In keeping its humanity repressed.
For once you must try not to shirk the facts:
Mankind is kept alive by bestial acts.
(p.117)

The play is set in the criminal underworld of London. Brecht concedes that criminals are brutal, but makes the point that they are merely an extension of a brutal world. The means this production used for putting this idea on stage, for communicating it to an audience were inspired by Brecht's "Notes to *The Threepenny Opera*." In it Brecht writes, "*The Threepenny Opera* deals with bourgeois conceptions ... It is a sort of summary of what the spectator in the theatre wishes to see of life. ... however he sees, at the same time, certain things that he does not wish to see," (*BOT*, p. 43). I take this to mean that Brecht is giving the bourgeois audience their fantasy of the criminal world, but, at specific moments, he gives them a dose of harsh reality.

This production of *The Threepenny Opera* aimed to present the audience with an idealized *Masterpiece Theater*/operetta version of the London underworld, but, periodically puncture that illusion with images of real brutality, poverty, and injustice.

Journal

February-October, 2001

Selection Process

Having to come up with a play for my thesis production put me in a situation I loathe. The productions I have directed that I feel have been most successful were all my own brainchildren. I would decide that I wanted to direct a particular play – *Billy Budd*, Shakespeare's History Plays, etc. – and I either raised the money to produce it myself or I found a theatre to co-produce it with me. Whenever I have to think of a play to fill a slot or satisfy an assignment, I draw a blank. So I here I am being asked to fill a slot for an assignment that will be the culmination of my three years work in graduate school.

While I enjoy comedy tremendously and have directed comedies, I have not fully staged an unadulterated comedy since 1997. For the past six years my focus has been on the Greeks, Shakespeare's History plays, and my own adaptation of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* – which, by the way, is very funny. So, my adviser Barry Kyle and I decided that I should direct a comedy for my thesis. I had a comedy ready to go: Peter Barnes' *Red Noses*. It's about the plague. Barry pointed out that, if part of the purpose of my directing a comedy was to diversify my resume, perhaps I should choose one on a different subject. Had I thought of *The Odd Couple*?

I had a feeling I wasn't going to like *The Odd Couple*. I loved the television series, primarily because of the inspired lunacy of Tony Randal – an otherwise limited actor –, but I had never been able to make it through movie – which is a fairly faithful adaptation of the play. I was right. I couldn't make it through the play, either.

I went to the library and took out a great number of comedies: Durang, Peter Schaffer, Caryl Churchill, other Neil Simon plays, etc. I ended up tossing almost all of them aside before I finished them. I have spent a good deal of my life loving comedy; I know I have seen plenty of wonderful comedies, but whenever I have to think of one to direct, none of the plays I read seems to satisfy.

I started looking at the plays that George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart had written in collaboration, separately, and with others. During the previous semester I had directed a scene from Hart's *Light up the Sky* for an American Drama class. The play is fun, but it is a satire that uses a rubber mallet rather than a dart to hit its targets. Nonetheless, a possibility – not wholly satisfactory, but a possibility. I then read *The Man Who Came to Dinner* and was pleasantly surprised – I liked the play much better than the movie with Monty Woolly. Then a light bulb went on: *Dinner at Eight*.

Kaufman and Ferber's *Dinner at Eight* holds a special place in my memory. My father was a political activist and social critic. In the fall of 1988, he was suffering from esophageal cancer. He was invited to participate in a post-show discussion following a performance of *Dinner at Eight* at the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven. He accepted the invitation because it was something we could do together. We went up and saw the play. I was moved by it. It portrays a dying world. It ends chillingly as the characters go in to dinner while the audience and the main character know that all is lost. Having a drink after the show, I told my father that the play reminded me of *The Cherry Orchard*. The next day, he quoted me in the post-show discussion. He had been asked to speak about the relevance of the play to today – at the time, “today” was the last year of Ronald Reagan's presidency. He said that in its specifics the play was not really relevant. Not

only did the old money *noblesse oblige* businessman, whose time passes in the play, no longer exist, the cowboy capitalist who steals his business doesn't exist anymore either. However, with huge tax cuts and increased military spending, with a growing disparity between rich and poor – and a litany of other problems created by Reagan –, “perhaps, *we, ourselves*, are going to dinner at eight!” The audience burst into thunderous applause and my father ended his speech – even though he hadn't intended that to be his closing line.

I reread the play. It would be hard. It was long – I then remembered being bored as well as moved. It had a huge cast and a great number of scene changes. It was a play that I felt needed to be staged realistically with detailed sets. The technical demands of the show might well lead the chair of the department to put the kibosh on it. Also, it wasn't a comedy: it was a tragedy with comic elements. However, it was a tragedy set in the world of frothy 1930s screwball comedy. I decided to discuss the choice with Barry, but I needed a back up.

I remembered that Woody Allen's movie *Don't Drink the Water* had been a stage play before it was a movie. I remembered it as being typical of the comedies I loved as a child: a comedy with an adventure story plot that engrossed the audience, with good guys and bad guys. I read the play. It was a little too schtick and borscht belt. However, it might be fun to direct something that old fashioned.

After class the following day, I told Barry I had narrowed the list of plays down to three possibilities. The first choice was *Dinner at Eight* and the two back-ups were *The Man who Came to Dinner* and *Don't Drink the Water*. I told Barry about the trip to the

Long Wharf and he said I should do *Dinner at Eight*. He said he would read it and we would meet the next day.

He read it. He changed his mind. The big stumbling block for him was the number of middle aged characters in the play. Not only were they middle aged, their psychology was determined by their age. Many of these characters were people who were past their prime and living with regret. It was going to be very difficult to find student actors who could handle these parts. I agreed with Barry.

We also agreed that there was a similar problem with *The Man Who Came To Dinner*. The play hinged on finding an actor to play the middle-aged and urbane Sheridan Whiteside. Confronted with the reality of actually directing *Don't Drink The Water*, the play seemed too paltry for a thesis production.

Facing a brick wall and a deadline for the submission of project proposals the next day, Barry asked me if I had considered Brecht. He asked how I felt about new translations of *The Good Person of Szechwan* and *The Threepenny Opera* – Barry, being English pronounced it in anglo fashion – appropriate, since the play is about the London underworld – as “threepenny.” My familiarity with Brecht was limited, bordering on the non-existent. I had read *The Good Person of Szechwan* the previous semester and didn't like it and told Barry that I wasn't interested in it – my unspoken thought was I'd rather have my fingernails pulled out one by one. I told him that, to my shame, I had never read or seen *Threepenny*, but that the idea interested me. I went off to get a couple of translations of the play out of the library and Barry said that he would try to find me a recording of the music. We would meet again the next day.

Confronting Brecht

Brecht was a gap in my knowledge of dramatic literature. Until the previous year, I had not read or seen a Brecht play. During my second semester at LSU, my fellow directing students and I had organized an informal study group in which we read some of Brecht's theoretical writings as well as *The Good Person of Szechwan* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. I knew that Brecht was a communist and that he had been given his theatre by the East German government. Having been raised in a democratic socialist household aligned with the reformist social democratic parties of Western Europe, I was prejudiced against Brecht. The animosity I felt towards him, in part, came out of a deeply principled position and was, in part, frivolous. If Brecht took the patronage of the East German government with some awareness of the atrocities committed by that regime and its Soviet master, he was then complicit in some of the most horrific crimes the world has ever known. However, my distaste for the man also arose from my participation in the ludicrous sectarian squabbles of the left: Brecht was a "Stalinist," I am a "reformist social democrat."

I also looked on him as an aesthetic enemy. I was aware that Brecht was an exponent of didactic theatre. I believe that the most profound and moving art is that which presents the human condition in all its complexity without passing judgement. I believe that didactic art is, *in most cases*, reductive and that it does not touch the depths of the human heart which has had to grapple with the uncertainties of life. However, there are exceptions to every rule. Taking a bold, unabashed political stance can make for exciting theatre and there is something moving in the Promethean willingness to go down in a good fight. *Threepenny* is certainly not a Promethean tragedy, but it does have moments of militancy that are theatrically thrilling.

Threepenny intrigued me on several levels. When I was a child, the famous Paul Davis poster for the New York Shakespeare Festival/Lincoln Center Theater production of the play had been all over my native New York – we even had a copy of the poster in my house. The poster – which depicted Raul Julia wearing a monocle, kid gloves, a derby, and holding a walking stick – appealed to my childhood affinity for villains in fancy Edwardian clothes. And while I find the white-faced, monotone cliché of Brecht/Weill/Weimar cabaret tiresome, the darkness and edge of that style, when done well, appeals to me.

When I started reading the play, it struck a chord right off the bat. Peachum's organization of beggars reminded me of one of my favorite series of books and one of my favorite movies. The movie is Friz Lang's *M* and is part of the same Weimar tradition as Brecht and Weill. *M* presents a fantasy world in which, not just the rackets of organized crime, but seemingly random street crime is centralized. In *M*, the underworld uses an organization of beggars to track down a child murderer who has brought unwanted police scrutiny upon a German city. The series of books – actually a pair of books – were John Gardner's *The Return of Moriarty* and *The Revenge of Moriarty*. In the books, Gardner – the writer who took over the James Bond series after Ian Flemming's death, not the author of *Grendel* – depicts Sherlock Holmes' nemesis Professor Moriarty – one of the characters with whom I identified in childhood – as employing a network of beggars as spies. In a section that is clearly derived from *M*, the Moriarty organization tracks down and kills Jack the Ripper.

I decided to do the play. However, I realized that what drew me to the play was decidedly un-Brechtian. I was immersed in a romantic fantasy of crime rather than standing at a critical distance from the reality of crime.

I faced other challenges. I had to overcome my political prejudice against Brecht. I firmly believe that one has to separate the artist from his/her politics. As a spectator/viewer, you have to be able to recognize artistry in the service of a point of view with which you disagree. As a director, the playwright's personal political views should be irrelevant as long as the play itself does not have an agenda you find objectionable – *Threepenny* is critical of capitalism – as am I – it is not a Stalinist play. I have frequently put aside my political differences in my consideration of work by right-wing artists – Dostoevsky, Anouilh, etc. I find it difficult to extend the same courtesy to artists on the left with whom I disagree – I know the left too intimately. Perhaps, I need to heed the biblical advice given in one of the great liberal entertainments of the American theatre: “He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind.”

I also had to overcome my aesthetic differences with Brecht. As I have stated repeatedly, there are exceptions to every rule. In directing *Threepenny*, I could not let my objection to didactic theatre in general prevent me from doing justice to an exciting and funny piece of theatre.

Brecht's idea of alienation also presented a challenge. I understand alienation-effects to be those jarring moments that prevent the spectator from getting caught up in the play and, therefore, force him/her to maintain a critical distance. Using such techniques often results in a director gratuitously calling attention to him/herself. I tend to favor directorial unobtrusiveness. Again, there are exceptions to every rule and there

are many directors who use conspicuous, jarring theatrical gestures to make exciting theatre. The challenge, therefore, in directing Brecht, is to be faithful to his ideas, to create those alienating moments, but to do so with taste and judgement so that those moments are genuinely exciting and not gratuitous.

Interlude

Having chosen *Threepenny* for my thesis project, I almost immediately left Baton Rouge for the rest of the semester. Barry, the chair of the department, and my other professor that semester had agreed to let me return home early to direct *Henry IV, Parts I & II* for my theatre company – The Eleventh Hour Theatre Co. – at La MaMa. Being a two play rotating repertory series, *Henry IV* was a huge undertaking. There was only money in the Eleventh Hour's budget to pay me a small director's fee, so I had to work survival jobs. I usually support myself by tutoring. Returning to New York in March was problematic for this kind of work. Since the second half of the school year was well under way, most tutors had already been hired, and summer school was over three months away. I struggled through until July and then was totally consumed with survival work. Between financial concerns and the Henrys there was little time to think about *Threepenny*.

Nor could I immediately devote myself to *Threepenny* upon my return to Baton Rouge at the end of August. I was supposed to complete my work for the previous semester on schedule while in New York. Between the Henry's, looking for survival jobs, and actually working at survival jobs, there was no time to complete my schoolwork and I had to take incompletes. So, when I returned to LSU, my first priority was finishing the previous semester's work. In addition to this, I had to keep up with my

current schoolwork. Since the production was not opening until February, I was not really behind schedule. However, I'd only read the play once. Every time someone asked me what I was planning to do with *Threepenny*, I felt like saying, "I'll tell you when I've read the play."

September 11th, 2001

As anyone reading this journal entry will know, on September 11th, 2001, terrorists flew two jets in into the World Trade Towers and destroyed them, another jet was crashed into the Pentagon, and yet another crashed in rural Pennsylvania when passengers overpowered the hijackers. Between three and four thousand people were killed. Given the number of people who work in and visit the World Trade Center, the potential for loss of life had been in the tens of thousands.

The September 11th attacks temporarily affected the dynamic in the classes my fellow directing students and I had with Barry. In reality, I think we all fundamentally had the same opinion in regard to the attacks. We were all appalled and unqualifiedly opposed the Islamic fundamentalists who had organized the attacks. I believe, at least Barry and I – and probably the other two students – acknowledged that the very complex and morally ambiguous issues of U.S. policy in the Middle East had provided the motivation for the attacks, but we agreed that even if you took a wholly critical view of U.S. foreign policy, anything the U.S. had done paled in comparison to the deliberate targeting of tens of thousands of civilians. Barry and I – and possibly the other students – also agreed that it was unfortunate that these attacks had occurred at a time when the unilateralism of George W. Bush's foreign policy had isolated the U.S. However, I think Barry overstated his qualified view of the U.S. in this case and gave it a left-wing slant.

In turn, one of the other students overreacted to what Barry said and Barry, in turn, misinterpreted what the student said. As a result, there was a somewhat belligerent atmosphere in class: the lefty Brit vs. his American students. Therefore when Barry said that he thought all our current directing projects should be affected by September 11th, I thought, “I’ll be goddamned if I’m going to do some anti-imperialist, third-worldist *Threepenny* in opposition to U.S. military action that I support. I’m going to do a fluffy Professor Moriarty version of the play.”

Around the beginning of October, I finished the paper that made up the lion’s share of my uncompleted work from the previous semester. So, I began to reread *Threepenny*. I soon began to see the relevance of the current situation to the play and was placed in an ethical dilemma. Peachum’s speech about his manipulating of human pity immediately brought to mind both the use of the images of September 11th for fundraising and all the sentimental cathartic events that had followed the attacks. It occurred to me to use projections – something that Brecht encourages – and, during Peachum’s speech, to show commercials for charities, like the Christian Children’s Fund – the Sally Struthers commercials –, culminating in fundraising commercials for the Red Cross and other organizations raising money for the victims of September 11th. It then occurred to me to interrupt the speech and have actors come into the audience and solicit money for competing charities.

However, raising money for the victims of the attacks and their families and for helping with the rebuilding of the financial district and the economic recovery of New York is something I support. And while many of the post-September 11th media events were overly sentimental and had reached the point at which they were bordering on

emotional pornography, after a tragedy of the magnitude of the attacks, people need catharsis and sentimentality – myself included – and who am I to judge it. To use September 11th for theatrical effect seemed to me glib and ghoulish.

Two other moments in the play brought September 11th to mind. In “The Canon Song” Macheath and Tiger Brown sing about their army days when they butchered people “Whose skin,” to quote the Manheim/Willett translation, “is black or yellow,” (p.85). This, of course, brings to mind Western imperialism in the Third World, including the Middle East. Manheim and Willett also translate the chorus of the “Second Threepenny Finale” as

What Keeps mankind alive? The fact that millions
Are daily tortured, stifled, punished, silenced, oppressed.
Mankind can keep alive thanks to its brilliance
In keeping its humanity repressed.
For once you must try not to shirk the facts:
Mankind is kept alive by bestial acts.
(P. 117)

The idea of using projections of atrocities came to mind: the holocaust, fire hoses being turned on civil rights demonstrators, the killing fields, etc. Not to include images of atrocity from the Middle East would seem wishy-washy under current circumstances. I would feel compelled to be even handed: to depict Western and Israeli atrocities as well as Arab atrocities. However, because of the fact that when the theatre is political, it is usually left-wing and anti-imperialist, audiences would probably interpret these projections as making a pro-Arab, anti-Western/Israeli statement, despite the inclusion of Arab atrocities. The question also arises whether to use the image of the planes slamming into the twin towers. Not to use it would be equivocating, using it would be exploitive.

In addition to ethical questions, these overtly political ideas raised issues of taste and judgement. Were these they too crude? Even if they weren't, I lacked a unifying concept, so all these devices seemed haphazard.

Mid-Late October, 2001

Beginning the Process of Choosing a Translation

When Barry suggested a new translation of *Threepenny*, he was referring to a version by Jeremy Sams. This translation had been used for a production in Alabama by my fellow directing student Vastine Stabler. Vastine explained to me that Sams had translated the lyrics, but the libretto that accompanied these lyrics was by Robert MacDonald. Sams used contemporary references, where MacDonald kept the play relatively Victorian. The play itself is confusing in terms of time, since it refers to the coronation of a queen – presumably Victoria –, yet, references to Macheath wearing spats and patent leather shoes suggests the late Victorian or Edwardian era – I later discovered in my reading that the theatre in which *Threepenny* was originally performed only had Edwardian costumes in stock and that the actor who played Macheath was vain and insisted on dapper clothing. According to Vastine, the most jarring disjuncture between the libretto and the lyrics is that MacDonald sticks to the original and writes about the coronation of a queen, whereas Sams makes it a king.

Vastine was only able to find the libretto and the lyrics to “The Ballad of Mack the Knife” and the “Third Threepenny Finale.” I really loved the Sams version of the “Mack the Knife.” What has previously been translated as “jack-knife” or just plain “knife” is translated as “flick knife,” which has a wonderful sound to it. One of Sams’ updated verses is particularly searing:

You remember that fire in Hounslow
Twenty Asians and a cat
While they're raking through the embers
"Here's a flick knife"
Fancy that.
(P.2)

The king who is crowned in the Sams version is the current Prince William. I found this very funny and now threw the idea of projected images of the golden William into my crude hodge-podge of ideas along with the Red Cross solicitors.

I contacted the leasing agent and was sent the complete Sams lyrics and MacDonald libretto. The first thing I discovered is that the Sams lyrics are an out and out adaptation. They are titled "*The Threepenny Opera*, Lyrics by Jeremy Sams," not "Lyrics by Bertolt Brecht, translated by Jeremy Sams."

I also found that I did not like his versions of the other songs as much as I liked his version of "The Ballad of Mack the Knife." So I decided to start comparing all the versions of the lyrics I had. MacDonald's libretto included his translation of the lyrics. I had been told by Vastine that Marc Blitzstein's translation of the lyrics for the 1954 off-Broadway production had been bowdlerized. Vastine had a copy of a script from an Alabama theatre company that used Blitzstein as a basis, but attempted to restore the lyrics to their original political and sexual explicitness. One of my roommates had a version from a Washington theatre that combined different translations but used a lot of Blitzstein's lyrics. Someone else gave me the original cast recording of the Blitzstein version, but I read in the liner notes that his lyrics for the recording had been rewritten and censored more than his original translation. The LSU library had the libretto by Desmond Vessey with lyrics by Eric Bentley. As I compared lyrics, I used Sams, MacDonald, Manheim & Willett, Bentley, Michael Feingold's translation that

accompanied a German concert recording of the songs, and the updated Blitzsteins from Alabama and D.C. I decided to use songs from almost all the translations, with the possible exception of Bentley. In some cases I combined the lyrics from two translations within one song.

As I read the translations of the lyrics, I listened to the German concert recording and two choreographic ideas occurred to me. “The Ballad of Mack the Knife” is very long and there are two verses that seem to initiate musical shifts – being a musical layman I could not identify the nature of the shifts. Each shift caused an image to spring to my mind. The first was that of women walking down the aisles of the theatre tossing flower petals into the audience from baskets. The second image is that of the women on the stage waltzing with each other. These excessively dainty images may provide a funny counterpoint to the bloodiness of the lyrics.

The second idea arose from the slow tempo of “The Ballad of Sexual Slavery.” It is very slow and graceful. It suggested an erotic parody of 40s/50s musical dream ballet involving beds. Throw two more ideas into my mess of a conceptual stew.

The Unifying Idea

There was a school break on Thursday and Friday, October 11th and 12th. So, I decided to take a long weekend and go back home to New York. On the flight back to Baton Rouge, I started reading Brecht’s theoretical writings. These gave me several ideas. His notion of a smokers theatre in which people were allowed to comfortably sit back and smoke their cigars and, therefore, retain a relaxed and critical attitude as opposed to a reverential one, gave me the idea of selling concessions in the auditorium. Brecht’s insistence that the songs be set apart as songs and not be treated as extensions of

the dramatic action, coupled with his personal interest in boxing, gave me the idea of having a boxing referee's mic lowered from the ceiling for some of the musical numbers.

I reread a piece he had written about *Threepenny* – I first read it as an afterward in the Desmond Vesey/Eric Bentley translation. In the essay, Brecht writes, “*The Threepenny Opera* deals with bourgeois conceptions ... It is a sort of summary of what the spectator in the theatre wishes to see of life. ... however he sees, at the same time, certain things that he does not wish to see,” (*BOT*, p. 43). Both times I read this essay, I saw myself as the bourgeois spectator who wished to see an idealized Dickensian underworld. However, where the first reading confirmed for me that my interest in the Professor Moriarty aspects of the play was in opposition to what Brecht was after, the second reading gave me an idea which would allow me to use my fantasy and serve Brecht at the same time. Put the bourgeois fantasy of the underworld on stage, but puncture it with harsh reality in specific places.

This idea solved several problems. The first problem was that of which period to set the play in. As I mentioned above, the script has elements that suggest both early Victorian and Edwardian settings. My personal tastes, as well as the villains I identified with as a child, leaned towards the sleekness of the Edwardian as opposed to the fussiness of the early Victorian. However, the posters and pictures from the 1970s New York Shakespeare Festival/Lincoln Center Theater production with Raul Julia indicated that the Edwardian version had been done as well as it could be. This new idea of puncturing an idealized conception of the London underworld resolved this question in favor of the early Victorian. This idea gave me the opportunity to go after *Masterpiece Theater*/Merchant-Ivory “hat dramas” – which at their best are quite good and at their

worst are kitsch for women who sit at home with their cats. Therefore, I would go with as pretty and fussy a Victorian look as possible – it should look like A & E’s *Pride & Prejudice*.

This concept also unified my hitherto erratic ideas – all of them are ways of puncturing this idealized vision. It also reduced the significance of the September 11th quandary: now that there was a central idea, these individual moments were less important and if I used them, they too would serve to puncture the fantasy.

My main ideas for breaking the illusion were costuming ideas. The Ballad Singer would be costumed as realistically as possible as a contemporary homeless person. I envisioned him wearing nothing but a garbage bag. This led me to the idea of having other cast members promenade in their Victorian costumes during the overture and then part to reveal the Ballad Singer.

My second costuming idea was influenced by a recording I had heard of Nina Simone singing “Pirate Jenny” in a snarling, husky voice. The song is about a hotel maid who fantasizes of being a pirate’s moll and getting revenge on all the townspeople who have treated her badly. In the script, the song is assigned to Polly, who sings it as an entertainment at her wedding. However, the song was reassigned to Lotte Lenya as Jenny Diver in the 1954 production and Vastine had told me that he, too, had assigned the song to Jenny. I decided that I would take the song out of the wedding scene and make it a post-intermission curtain-raiser. I would have it sung by an actress – preferably African American – dressed as a member of the LSU custodial staff and have it sung in the style of a belting jazz chanteuse. This would puncture the LSU student audience’s fantasy with the reality of the low-paid people who serve them.

First Design Meeting

I had planned to start setting up meetings with designers as soon as I got back from New York. The wedding scene involves Mack's gang setting up a reception with stolen furniture, which seemed to be an issue for both the set designer and the prop master. I also realized that set and lights might well overlap. And since microphones – in particular, the boxing mic – were to play a prominent part in the production, it seemed like a good idea to include the sound designer. At this point, I decided to have an initial meeting with all the designers as opposed to one-on-one meetings. I toyed with the idea of including the music director and the choreographer, but decided that there was too great a chance that we would not touch on issues that concerned them.

I had already mentioned one idea in passing to the Nels Anderson, the set designer. I envisioned a set similar to the one for the original Broadway production of *Sweeney Todd*: a cavernous warehouse which would serve as a unit set – the idea did not include the spinning box from *Sweeney Todd*.

In addition to having the initial design meeting, Kris Duecker, the costume designer, and I had to meet with the director of the costume shop, Kjersten Lester-Moratzka. In the course of setting up both meetings Kris and I briefly discussed my costuming ideas.

The week before the design meeting, I saw the prop master Marshall Kesler – I use prop master as a gender neutral term, Marshal is a woman – at the meet and greet for Swine Palace's – the Equity theatre affiliated with the theatre department – production of *A Christmas Carol*. I discussed with her the furniture-heavy wedding scene as well as another idea inspired by Brecht's essay on the play. Brecht writes that he is annoyed that

most productions cut the royal messenger's horse, arguing that a mounted royal messenger is a central part of the bourgeois fantasy world that he is presenting and violating. After having read this I decided to do Brecht one better and have the messenger lowered from the flies on a winged horse. Marshal was intrigued by the idea and did not seem to think it a practical impossibility.

The meeting was set for Monday, October 22nd. Nels, Kris, Brent Glen – the lighting designer – and Natalie Gautreaux -- the stage manager – were all present at the start of the meeting. I knew Marshal was coming from an appointment and would be late. When I noticed that Lewis Rhodes – the sound designer – was missing, Brent assured me that he had forgotten about the meeting. Because of my faith in the human race, I decided to give Lewis a few minutes and so started informally chatting about ideas rather than formally beginning the meeting. In this chat, the winged horse came up. Like Marshal, Nels did not think it an impossible idea to realize, however, he came up with an alternative. He suggested having the messenger slide in on a wire stretched from the balcony to the stage. I said I was fine with either approach as long as we were travestyng the fantasy of eleventh hour salvation.

No sign of Lewis. We began. I laid out the idea of establishing an idealized *Masterpiece Theater* vision of the London underworld and puncturing it with harsh reality and anachronism. We discussed how this meant going with early Victorian costumes and Kris felt confident that she could reconcile that choice with the references to spats and black patent leather shoes.

I talked to Kris about the costumes that would puncture the illusion. I reiterated the ideas for the Ballad Singer and Pirate Jenny and suggested that she should think of

two or three other anachronistic and harshly realistic costumes. I threw out the possibilities of a member Mack's gang who would be genuinely scary if you met him on the street and of a prostitute who looked really disease-ridden and drug-addicted.

We then discussed the set. I reiterated the idea of the *Sweeney Todd* warehouse look. I added specifics. I wanted a balcony upstage center on which Peachum would make his first appearance and which we would use as the gallows. I wanted the stage to have extensions at angles down left and down right that would have standing microphones used to set the songs apart from the action. I wanted a boxing mic lowered from the flies down center. I wanted two other mics lowered from the flies: one center stage and one above the balcony. We needed an ornate wedding bed for Mac and Polly in the wedding scene. I also wanted three or four single beds for the "Ballad of Sexual Slavery" dream ballet. I wanted these beds on wheels so they could be gotten on and off stage. Nels suggested Murphy beds instead of wheels. I said I was open to the idea. I said that I wanted three screens for video or projections. I asked Nels whether we would run into sightline problems with the three screens, the balcony, and the flying horse. Nels said not if two of the screens were mounted on the sides of the proscenium arch and the center one could be raised and lowered.

I spoke about how we would use the mics to set the songs apart from the action and that we would also want special lighting for the songs, which would probably mean a follow-spot. Brent suggested two follow spots. Being a follow-spot virgin, I deferred.

Marshal arrived and we discussed the wedding scene. We would have to have a harpsichord, the legs of which could be sawn off on stage to make a bench. We would need a sofa as well. Both had to be ornate, since they are stolen from the homes of the

rich, and they had to be in different styles, because Mack complains that they don't go together. Mack's gang brings the stolen furniture in off a lorry. Nels anticipated what I was about to say and suggested bringing a van in through the scene shop doors.

We then moved on to the question of the band. Brecht calls for the band to be visible. Since I first started thinking about the play, I envisioned the band as a concentration camp orchestra. To me, this was vaguely suggestive of Weimar cabaret. I guess because it is clearly German and it is macabre. If I analyze this, I could argue that the image comes up because the Holocaust is an atrocity which is associated with music. During his interrogation, Adolph Eichmann testified that he tried to make the prisoners comfortable on their way to the gas chamber by having the camp orchestra play. Also, the image of the concentration camp orchestra was introduced into the popular consciousness by the TV movie *Playing for Time*.

I raised the idea and voiced my concern that this might be a glib use of a profound horror. Marshal said she felt it could come off that way. She asked what the point was. I said that the Holocaust could be used as one of the real atrocities that punctures the Victorian fantasy. I also said that it pointed to the German authorship of the play. Nels brought up the association between the Holocaust and music raised by *Playing for Time*.

I raised another concern: that since I am Jewish, I could be seen as prioritizing Jewish suffering over all other suffering. Marshal shared this concern. I suggested that one way of mitigating this problem was to have the band wear the insignia of all the different kinds of camp prisoners: Jews, Slavs, Gypsies, homosexuals, political dissidents, etc. Marshal warmed to the idea. Kris suggested including victims of other atrocities in the band. I said that I was definitely going to have projections of other

atrocities, such as the Killing Fields and Rwanda, and that I was intrigued by this idea. I told Kris that she should explore both the possibilities of the different concentration camp insignia and of actually having the orchestra made up of victims of different genocides.

We now moved onto the placement of the band. I admitted that my other set specifications hadn't left much room. Nels suggested running with the prisoners idea and putting the band in a cage under one of the downstage extensions. I liked the idea. At some point during the band discussion, Lewis walked in looking for a room in which to have a meeting. He realized that he had stumbled upon a meeting he was supposed to be at and sat down. Either he or Brent raised the question of lights for the band. Nels suggested bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling of the cage. I loved the idea.

I spoke to Lewis about the microphones. I told him that the boxing mic was the only distinctive period mic I wanted. All the others could be simple contemporary microphones. Not only did I see the image of the actors standing at the mics as setting the songs apart, I saw amplified sound as creating that effect as well. Therefore in those songs in which the actors had to move around and have their hands free – such as Mack and Jenny's tango – we would need body mics.

Somehow, I got the sense that Lewis wasn't quite with me. I saw him later in the day at Swine Palace. He explained to me that he was concerned about the mic hanging from the flies center stage – not the boxing mic, the one upstage of it – and the mic hanging from the flies above the balcony. The only mics that are designed to be used in that way are overhead mics, but they aren't conspicuous enough for what I wanted. He asked me whether the mics had to be functional or whether we could use body mics when

the actors are singing into the mics hanging from the flies. I said as long as they appeared to be singing into the mics and the sound was amplified, I was fine with it.

November & Early December, 2001

Initial Music and Choreography Meetings

I met with Terry Byars, the music director, to give him all the lyrics translations from which I was working and told him which translations I wanted to use for which songs. He was going to read them over and give me his opinion, then we would set up a time for him to sing the lyrics to the music.

I wanted Molly Buchman, who is in charge of LSU's dance minor, to do the choreography. When I first got here, Michael Tick – the chair of the Theatre Department – had said the Molly was a serious, accomplished dancer and choreographer. Also Molly has a lot of experience with ballet and I thought this made her ideal for the dream ballet parody. I had already had several brief and tentative meetings with Molly to discuss whether she would be able to fit doing *Threepenny* into her schedule. Things were still up in the air, but I decided to lay out my movement ideas for her. This meeting raised doubts in my mind. When I told her about the pretty costume promenade that I wanted to accompany the overture, she questioned how we could do this in a play about beggars, thieves, and whores. When I mentioned the flower-strewing, waltzing women for the “The Ballad of Mack the Knife,” she was hesitant because she liked the choreography to tell the same story as the song. To my dream ballet idea, Molly raised the concern that archetypal dream ballet moves are very difficult and would require skilled dancers, including men who were strong enough to do lifts. She qualified all this by saying she would ultimately do whatever I wanted. Nonetheless, I was concerned.

I spoke with Terry on the phone and he said that all the lyrics choices worked fine. We set up a time for me to go over to his house to hear him sing the lyrics to the music. This proved to be a little difficult. The department had not yet paid for the rights or ordered the scores. The score we had was one that Vastine had lent me, which had been used by the Alabama theatre company. That score had Michael Feingold's lyrics written in, so when he played the music on the piano and sang the lyrics, Terry had to go back and forth between the score and the lyrics I had chosen. To add to the confusion, since we had not yet made a final decision, we had not compiled all the different translations I wanted to use into a single lyrics sheet, so Terry had to read from several editions. The score was also missing "The Canon Song." The result of this was that I only heard a few verses from each song, and I heard them stumbled through.

Nonetheless, the translation choices seemed to work.

Second Design Meeting: the Horse and the Band

Nels had a deadline to submit his plans to the shop and asked me to call a second design meeting to make sure everyone was on the same page. Nels brought the model to this meeting: the set looked spectacular. Sometime after the first design meeting, Nels had given me xeroxes of some etchings of Victorian London. He asked me what I thought of flying in flat painted scenic elements in the style of these etchings. I was hesitant. I was afraid that they would look hokey. While I wanted to parody *Masterpiece Theatre* romanticism in the costumes, I did not want the *Sweeney Todd* style set to be a joke – even though the seeming industrial revolution harshness of this style is as much of an illusion as Victorian prettiness. Because of my hesitation, I asked Nels to make me

miniature examples of these painted set-pieces. They looked fantastic and echoed yet another famous Broadway set design – Edward Gorey’s *Dracula*.

The black and grey color-scheme raised questions about the color scheme of the costumes. I had originally envisioned them in very soft bieges, tans, and fawns. This color scheme would not work with the set. I suggested a lot of pearl grey to Kris.

As the unifying idea of punctured idealization settled in, some of my original ideas started to look questionable. The contemporary homeless Ballad Singer and the custodial worker Pirate Jenny squarely focussed the production on economic injustice rather than political brutality. In this light, the concentration camp band seemed gratuitous. Also, since this punctured idealization was being manifested through elements that were intrinsic to the play – the way in which characters were costumed –, the external device of projections seemed grafted on. However, I was not yet ready to make the decision to part with these ideas. The Weimar-style morbidity of the band still had some appeal for me and in my mind’s eye I could see some of the projected images being very effective with certain songs. Also, if I did away with the projections, I might not have enough ways in which to puncture the fantasy. I therefore simply alerted the designers that these ideas might go.

As we looked at Nels’ model, we realized we were running out of fly space. We would be flying in Nels’ painted set elements and we would be flying in a lot of the stolen furniture in the wedding scene – as if they were being lowered from warehouse cranes. We didn’t have room for the horse. Also, while we could get a fake horse up in the flies, getting the messenger who rides it – Tiger Brown – up there, as well, was another story. Nels’ idea of having Brown slide in on a wire stretched from the balcony

also seemed impractical – we would have to have the ware stretched from balcony to stage for, at least, the entire second half of the play. At this point Natalie said her sister had a horse. Internally, I was ambivalent about this idea. A live horse would certainly be striking and it would start a buzz about the outrageousness of the production – as did my having the chorus-members bare their breasts in *Trojan Women* the previous year. On the other hand, I was uncertain as to whether a live horse would come across as a parody of the excesses of bourgeois opera or whether it would seem that we were actually indulging in that kind of excess.

As I said, I kept my ambivalence internal; what I actually said was that I loved the idea. I am excessively concerned with what other people think of me and I have a fear of confrontation. This problem has the positive effect of making me diplomatic and the negative effect making me wishy-washy. In this case, I was simply being wishy-washy. I didn't want to be seen to reject a bold idea and I didn't want to hurt Natalie's feelings.

We discussed the question of the manageability of the horse. I said that if the horse could not just be ridden by the actor, it would be very Brechtian to have the horse led in by crew-members, clearly dressed as such – I suggested IATSE t-shirts.

On the whole the meeting was successful, the other designers were excited by Nels' set.

Kris did not have her costume sketches ready so we decided to meet a couple of days later. At the start of this meeting, Kris said that she favored dropping the concentration camp idea. She felt that as the other design ideas had solidified, it had become gratuitous. She suggested, instead, costuming the musicians as the LSU Tiger Band. I liked this idea a lot. Since the Ballad Singer and Pirate Jenny – Pirate Jenny, in

particular – were pointing to the economic injustice that actually surrounded the audience, grounding the band in the audience’s world – and in the frivolity of the audience’s world – seemed to fit perfectly. However, I still had some attachment to the concentration camp idea, so I told Kris that I liked the idea, but I still wanted to hold off the final decisions. She was concerned about her deadline to get the sketches into the costume shop, but that she would ask Kjersten if she could hold off on the band – this issue of shop deadlines is one which has made this production a valuable learning experience, and will be discussed later in this journal.

Kris also wanted to drop the idea of having an anachronistic gang-member and an anachronistic whore. She felt that anachronistic costumes worked for the Ballad Singer and Pirate Jenny because they were external to the action of the play. The gang-member and the whore would be the only characters directly involved in the story who would not be in Victorian costumes. Kris felt they would be a distraction. I agreed with her and told her to give them Victorian costumes. As a result of this, I realized that I would probably have to keep the projections, because, without them, the Ballad Singer and Pirate Jenny would be the only elements puncturing the fantasy.

Kris showed me the sketches. The color scheme was different from what I mentioned at the previous meeting. Everything was brightly colored. It was more a parody of operetta than of *Masterpiece Theater*. I didn’t say anything about the color scheme. This time, there were both good and bad reasons for my silence. The bad reasons were the usual. Legitimately, I thought that these operetta-style would serve the same purpose as *the Masterpiece Theatre* costumes. Also, I had worked with Kris before

and had liked the actual costumes better than her sketches – she had done a brilliant job with *Trojan Women*.

There were some specific sketches I asked her to redo. She had not put the Ballad Singer in a garbage bag because two recent productions at LSU had had homeless people in garbage bags. Her sketch for the Ballad Singer looked very much like her sketches for Peachum’s beggars with their fake disfigurements. I told her that garbage bag was not important, but that he had to be genuinely disturbing and that I wanted him in a state of near-nakedness. I also asked her to make changes to Peachum and to redo Mrs. Peachum and some of the gang members.

Casting

When I started at LSU, Alan Walter, a third-year MFA directing student was working on his thesis production. The MFA actors were not allowed to audition for him because they were being reserved for two faculty-directed productions. I was outraged. This was Alan’s thesis production and his most important resource – actors – was limited. I swore that I would not let the same thing happen to me.

Last year, I found out that this year, the MFA actors were being reserved for a production that was going to compete in the American College Theatre Festival. I felt that I was put in a difficult situation, since competing in the Festival was something that would be of benefit to the actors. However, this class of MFAs was a year behind me and would still be here the following year when there would be no Directing thesis productions.

I suggested to my fellow MFA Directing student Anthony Winkler – whose thesis production was also going up this year – that we write a letter stressing the importance of

our thesis productions to our graduate education and the importance of as large a casting pool as possible to those productions. In the letter, we suggested that all the directors in the LSU and Swine Palace seasons hold joint auditions and then meet to make sure that every director's needs were met. We addressed this letter to the entire faculty, so that issue could be raised at a faculty meeting. Unfortunately the letter was misplaced by someone in the Theatre Department office. I did not find this out until the day before I had to leave Baton Rouge to start work on *Henry IV*. The day I was leaving I had to deliver another copy to the office to be xeroxed and put in all the faculty mail boxes.

When I called Anthony to find out what had happened at the faculty meeting, he told me that the idea of letting the MFA actors audition for us had been resisted, but that there was talk of coming up with an official casting policy. When I returned to Baton Rouge, I discovered that the plans to bring a production to the ACTF had been canceled, but that the MFA actors were now being reserved for Swine Palace shows and we would still not have access to them. A casting policy similar to the one we suggested had been adopted. All LSU Theatre directors would hold joint auditions for undergraduate actors, and then meet to try to make sure that everyone's needs were met. Anthony and I would have priority because our thesis productions were mainstage shows – we would have our choice of undergraduate actors. What made this frustrating was that the stated purpose of the new casting system was to safeguard the interests of the undergraduate actors *not* the MFA directors, despite the fact that we had raised the issue. I decided not to fight any further. One reason was that, even though the current class of MFA actors has a uniform level professionalism, only one or two of them seemed particularly right for *Threepenny*

Opera. The main reason for not pursuing it was that I am weary of fighting battles at LSU.

The first phase of the audition process was having the actors audition for all the directors with monologues. These auditions turned out to be a pleasant surprise as there were quite a few people with whom I was not familiar who were quite good. Two actors, in particular, stood out. The first was a young African American woman named Karly Pierre. She would be unable to attend the *Threepenny* singing auditions the next day, so she belted out an a'capella song. I had found my Pirate Jenny. The second was a young man named Mark Weinberg. He had a lot of musical theatre and opera credits on his resume. He did a comic monologue from *Forever Plaid*. He had a lot of energy and stage presence, but the character he was playing was very white bread. He was a possible Mack, if he could play a less clean-cut character.

In terms of acting ability, the most likely Mack was an actor named Arlando Smith. I had worked with Arlando two years before when I assisted Barry on Swine Palace's *A Midsummer Nights Dream*. The previous year, Arlando had dropped out of school and gone to New York to pursue an acting career. He had gotten cast in a theatre for young audiences tour and had gotten his Equity card.

Arlando was also a very strong singer. However, the next day at singing auditions, we found that Mack was out of his range – Arlando is a baritone, Mack is a tenor. Since I couldn't use Arlando as Mack, I decided to call him back for Peachum.

Up until this point, the auditions had been very efficiently organized by the new undergraduate acting teacher Jane Brody — at first I thought she was a little too efficient and dubbed her the casting commisar, but I soon grew to like her very much. However,

we had to organize our own callbacks. I had been spoiled by Jane's organizing of the initial auditions and did not prepare sufficiently. To add to the disorder of the callbacks, the only way I could audition the gang members was to have the gang, Mack, and Polly read an eight-character scene. Because the gang members were supporting roles, a lot of the actors called back for these parts were inexperienced. Because I am overly concerned with what actors think of me, I get very anxious when I'm disorganized – this compounded the problem.

Once I made it past the large group ordeal scene, I was on firmer footing. However, I realized I had problem. Mark Weinberg could not be anything but white bread. I didn't have a Mack. I asked Terry if he could give Arlando another singing audition and try to get him to hit Mack's high notes. If Arlando still couldn't hit the notes, I asked Terry if he could transpose the part. Terry said he would re-audition Arlando and that he could transpose the part. When Arlando came in to read for Peachum, Terry had him sing again. Arlando got up higher than he had previously. Terry asked me if I minded if he altered the melody in some places. I told him I had no idea what he was talking about and was, therefore, fine with it.

I ended up being very happy with the actors I cast in the principal roles. There were several actors whom I knew I wanted to use in smaller speaking roles, but I did not yet know exactly which part I wanted to give each actor. I also had to cast the ensemble. Not all the actors who auditioned with monologues came to the singing auditions – either because they didn't sing or because they weren't interested in being in *Threepenny* – my casting pool, therefore, had narrowed. I had to join Barry, Anthony, and Vastine in North Carolina to interview Gerald Freedman the morning after callbacks were completed. I

posted a principal cast list and decided to cast the smaller parts and the ensemble when I got back.

During auditions, I started to worry that Terry was too compliant. After the singing auditions, he did tell me who could not sing at all, who could sing chorus parts, and who could sing principal roles. However, when I presented him with my list of first choices for principal roles, he very casually accepted them all without question.

Casting the Ensemble and First Full Production Meeting

There are an indeterminate number of beggars, whores, and constables in *Threepenny Opera*. In deciding how many of each to choose, I was not limited by actors' salaries, since the play was being cast with unpaid students. However, I was limited by the costume budget. When I met with Kris to discuss the number of costumes, she told me she had found three named whores in addition to Jenny in one translation of the libretto – in the libretto chose to use there were four, but I cut one. She asked if we could limit ourselves to that number. I agreed. Whomever I cast as the whores would have to have some dancing ability for the “Ballad of Sexual Slavery” dream ballet.

Kris found quite a few constables referred to in the script, but I felt we could do with a total of two – one unnamed constable in addition to Constable Smith – particularly if it would buy me a few more beggars. I felt it was important to give Peachum a significant number of beggars, and wanted six to eight. Kris said we could afford to do that many beggars since their costumes could be pulled from stock rather than built and since I had reduced the number of constables and cut a costume change for the gang. One of the beggars needed to convincingly play a little girl for a specific sight gag.

Our first official production meeting – involving the production manager and shop heads, as well as the designers – was the Friday after call-backs ended and two days after I got back from North Carolina. At that point I had cast all the smaller speaking roles, but I had not finished casting the ensemble, nor had I decided which of the ensemble members I had cast would be beggars, whores, or constables. Kjersten asked me to get her a final cast list as soon as possible, so the shop could get to work. I told her I could complete casting by the middle of the following week.

Having shop deadlines is a new experience for me. Working with incredibly low budgets off-off Broadway, I am used to buying, borrowing, begging and stealing costumes, not having them built by a shop. I am also used to having sets that can be built during a single day of load-in. This experience is helping to prepare me for the day – which I hope will come – when I am hired to direct at theatres with substantial resources and shops of their own.

Mid-Late December, 2001

First Rehearsal

Because *Threepenny* is a musical – and therefore needed music and choreography rehearsals, as well as staging/acting rehearsals – I wanted six weeks of rehearsal prior to tech. The show is opening on February 14th, therefore, we would have to rehearse over the Christmas break. I knew it would be difficult to get the students back immediately after New Year's. Added to this, I had to attend a seminar in New York on December 18th in order for my theatre company to qualify for a grant. I decided to have a first read-thru on Monday, December 17th and leave for New York at the crack of dawn on the 18th.

Terry would then conduct music rehearsals until Friday, December 21st. We would begin full rehearsals on Monday, January 7th.

Because of my concern with what actors think of me, I am very anxious about how I come across at first rehearsals. I realized my anxiety was particularly absurd in this case in this case – I'm thirty-three, I'm directing a cast of undergraduates. Fortunately, my anxiety was under control. Even during the ten or fifteen minutes while we were waiting for the rehearsal to start and the last stragglers to arrive, I was able to sit with a minimum of discomfort without being excessively social – thereby undermining my authority – or finding some busy-work activity to keep me occupied. This may seem like an underwhelming accomplishment, but, for me, it is significant.

One question I had given a substantial amount of thought to before rehearsals started was how to deal with Brecht's "epic" style of acting. What is it? Do I want to attempt to use it? Should I even mention it at the first rehearsal?

It is unclear what Brecht means by "epic" acting. He writes that it is not empathetic. He later qualifies this by writing that not being empathetic does not mean being devoid of emotion. He writes that the actors should not become the characters, but comment on the characters. He holds up Charlie Chaplin as an ideal. He mentions some exercises which gave me a sense of what he might mean. He suggests having actors speak their lines in the third person and having them read passages from epic poems or the bible. The former exercise gave me the idea of having the actors speak the introductions that Brecht asks to have displayed at the top of each scene – as well as projecting them –, thereby having the actors narrate or comment on their characters.

Shortly before Thanksgiving I had an epiphany. I was watching a TV special of out-takes from *The Carol Burnett Show* and I realized that this could be what Brecht was writing about – really good sketch comedy acting.

This may or may not be the case, but I was still left with the question of whether I wanted to try working on the play in this way. It is by now a truism to say that Brecht did not use “epic” acting in the productions he directed. However, my interpretation of what he meant made some sense for *Threepenny Opera*.

Now I had to decide whether to talk about this at the first rehearsal. I was leaning against it. First, I find discussions of acting insufferable. Second, theorizing about acting often makes actors – particularly inexperienced ones – self-conscious. Finally, if young actors, who are used to doing the kind of improvs that are designed to get a laugh out of their classmates, are told to treat the material as sketch comedy, they will probably indulge in silliness and extreme caricature. I decided to simply say that we shouldn’t take ourselves too seriously and that we should have fun with the play.

The first rehearsal raised more concerns about Terry. I had decided to have a first read-thru before the actors had learned the songs – I could have devoted the entire week before Christmas to music rehearsals and had the read-thru on January 7th. I decided to have the actors just read the lyrics when they came to them, but to have Terry sing a couple of verses of each song before we started, to give the cast a sense of the music. He had not finished transcribing the lyrics we had chosen onto the score and he just stumbled through a few of the songs. To give him the benefit of the doubt, I had been giving him revisions of the lyrics up until the night before, and he had been performing a two-man show which closed the night before the rehearsal. Nonetheless, a warning-bell went off.

That Stalinist Fuck

In reading through the Manheim and Willett translation, I discovered something that really annoyed me. In *Solomon Song* Brecht writes of historical figures who had some outstanding quality – wisdom, daring, etc. – that brought them to an unhappy end. As I read Manheim and Willett’s translation, I found a verse about Brecht. I licked my sectarian chops, anticipating that his unhappy end would be his passive complicity in the totalitarianism of East Germany. The actual verse read:

You know the ever-curious Brecht
Whose songs you like to hum.
He asked too often for your peace
Where rich men get their riches from.
So, then you drove him overseas. How curious was my mother’s son!
But now that time is getting late
The world can see what followed on.
Inquisitiveness brought him to this state –
How fortunate the man with none!¹
(p.127)

What state? He died running a well-funded, internationally acclaimed theatre, and he was one of the privileged few in East Germany. “He asked too often for your peace?” Brecht did not exactly shake the foundations of Western capitalism.

Now I was mad. I was tempted to write my own verse attacking Brecht for his Stalinism. Before I did this, I had to wrestle with a couple of questions. As I wrote before, I believe in serving the author. Here I was, contemplating attacking the author. One of the reasons I chose to do *Threepenny Opera* was to overcome my prejudices and direct a play by an author whose personal politics I disagreed with. On the other hand, I

¹ I have since discovered that Brecht wrote the verse, but that it is not included in every edition of the play. The line “So now you drove him overseas,” suggests it was inserted after he fled Germany in 1933.

thought writing this verse would be very “Brechtian.” It would be maintaining a critical distance and making a political judgement.

The other question I had to answer was, was Brecht a Stalinist? It is possible that he was an anti-Stalinist communist and that he was oppositional within East Germany. At the moment, I had two biographies of Brecht. Vastine had given me one by Frederic Ewen and Nels had given me one by John Fuegi.

I looked at the Ewen first. I got the impression that not only was Ewen embarrassingly idolatrous of Brecht, but that he was also a Stalinist apologist. At one point, writing about the East German government’s censorship of Brecht’s opera *The Trial of Lucullus*, Ewen approvingly quotes Ernest Bonerman as writing, “[Brecht] never felt himself restricted in the freedom of expression. He felt, on the contrary, it was not only the right but the *duty* of the Party to correct him,” (p. 450). When I looked at the Ewen biography more closely during the Christmas break, I found an even more disturbing passage: “Brecht had never been a worshipper of heroes, and the personality cult had never been a part of his character. But he paid tribute to Stalin for his leadership of a people that had turned the tide against Nazism, thus saving the rest of the world at the price of incomparable sacrifice of human lives and territory,” (p.452). It was pretty clear that Ewen is biased. “Personality cult” is the phrase that Stalinists use when criticizing Stalinism.

Fuegi gave me what I wanted, but I was also suspicious of him. The title of his biography is *The Life and Lies of Bertolt Brecht*. This obviously shows a prejudice. The advantage it has over the Ewen book is that it seems to be more rigorously researched and documented. Fuegi paints a picture of Brecht as, at first, being callously indifferent to the

victims of Stalin's purges – some of whom were his friends and colleagues – and, later, as having private qualms about Stalinism, but maintaining a cowardly silence. He also writes that Brecht's privileges in East Germany were greater than I imagined: much more luxurious than the piddling dacha and lumbering limousine of a Soviet *aparatchik*.

This was enough for me, I wrote the verse.

You all do know the playwright Brecht
So principled was he
He fought against brutality
But said not a word when Stalin butchered
He was against hypocrisy.
He fought for right, but saved his life
And before the evening fell,
Our friend Brecht was doing quite well.
His principles were not that firm, you see.
If you've no principles, I envy you.

I gave the verse to Terry to interpolate and it was included in the lyrics sheet for the first rehearsal. Over the vacation, I would read the biographies more thoroughly and look for other sources. If I found that Fuegi was refuted, I would remove the verse.

The main premise of Fuegi's book is that Brecht's collaborators – three of whom were his lovers – often made greater contributions to Brecht's plays than they were given credit for and that in some cases, they actually wrote more of a play than Brecht did. Fuegi contends that Elisabeth Hauptman, who is credited with translating *The Beggars Opera* – on which *Threepenny* is based – into German and suggesting that Brecht take a look at it, actually wrote 80 percent of *Threepenny*. He also writes that Brecht took some of the play's lyrics from Rudyard Kipling and from a German translation of the poems of Francois Villon. In an example of Fuegi's bias, he implies that Brecht did not credit Kipling and Villon. In a seemingly scholarly and objective collection of essays on *Threepenny Opera* edited by Stephen Hinton, I found that Brecht did credit Kipling and

Villon, he did not credit Villon's translator – Hinton, however, concurs with Fuegi that Brecht was trying to screw the translator out of royalties – nonetheless, Brecht did credit Kipling and Villon.

Still, the more I read Fuegi's book, the more loathsome I found Brecht. I was tempted to give Hauptman billing over Brecht – "Book and Lyrics by Elisabeth Hauptman and Bertolt Brecht adapted from *The Beggars Opera* by John Gay (Interpolated Ballads by Francois Villon and Rudyard Kipling). I decided that if I could not find a substantiation of Fuegi's claim or if I find that the size of Hauptmann's contribution cannot be verified, I will probably give her joint credit with Brecht, but give him top billing – "Book & Lyrics by Bertolt Brecht and Elisabeth Hauptmann etc."

As far as Brecht's Stalinism goes, I also wanted to find other sources to confirm Fuegi's assertions. When I returned to Baton Rouge from New York, I glanced at the references to Stalin in Eric Bentley's *Brecht Commentaries*, and, in one of them, Bentley does refer to Brecht as a Stalinist. I planned to read Bentley more thoroughly.

During the break, I also reflected on my choice of making the production a tearing down of the romanticism of operetta and *Masterpiece Theatre*. Stephen Hinton's collection of essays contains a production history. The original Berlin production of *Threepenny* did indeed have the edgy, sexy look that I consider to be a Weimar cliché. I had first thought that that look had once been genuinely harsh and that it had become a cliché. But, it now occurred to me that presenting whores and criminals as sleek and sexy has always been a romantic fantasy. I had chosen not to go with a sharp, elegant Edwardian/1920s look because – based on posters and photos – I figured that that style had been done as well as it could be in the 1976 New York Shakespeare Festival/ Lincoln

Center Theater production. I now thought that that production may also have been indulging in cliché. I thought that these productions may have been presenting as much of an illusion as operetta does – in fact, a less honest illusion, since it pretends to be harsh – and that, perhaps, I was getting at true Brechtian irony in a way these productions hadn't.

Also during the break, I firmed up what I was going to do with the projections. I was going to use them, but sparingly. During “The Ballad of Mack The Knife” we would project images of bloody, murdered corpses. During Peachum's speech about human pity we would project images from television charity solicitations, including September 11th charities. During “The Cannon Song,” we would project an image of a the British brutalizing Africans or Indians, the famous photo of the Vietcong getting his brains blown out by a South Vietnamese soldier, and finally the photo of the corpse of the U.S. soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. When Mack is reprieved by the newly crowned King William V, we would project images of Princess Diana dressed as the Virgin Mary and of Prince William.

I had initially planned to project images of atrocities – the Holocaust, the Killing Fields, police turning fire hoses on civil rights demonstrators – in the “Second Threepenny Finale.” I had already decided to give the solos in that song to the Ballad Singer and Pirate Jenny, rather than to Mack and Mrs. Peachum or Jenny – the female solo is sung by one or the other in different editions of the play. By having the song sung by a homeless person and a custodial worker, I put the focus on economic rather than political oppression, so the images were no longer appropriate. Also, I felt it would be stronger to have the lyrics and what was going on the stage speak for themselves instead

of putting the focus on the projections. So I decided to project key lyrics rather than images:

What Keeps mankind alive? The fact that millions
Are daily tortured, stifled, punished, silenced, oppressed.
Mankind keep alive thanks to its brilliance
At keeping its humanity repressed

For one you must try not try to shirk the facts.
Mankind is kept alive by bestial acts.
(MW, p.117)

January 5th –11th, 2002

Return to Baton Rouge and First Week of Full Rehearsals

I scheduled a semi-official production meeting for the morning after I got back. My primary concerns were the props and set elements I needed to rehearse. I am prop-phobic. Most of the plays I have directed – I can think of one exception – have been minimalist in style, out of both aesthetic choice and economic necessity. My fear may arise out of the fact that I am neither physically coordinated nor – to use Human Resources jargon – “detail-oriented.” In *Threepenny*, there is one particularly prop-heavy scene – the wedding scene – in which Mack’s gang transforms a stable into a reception hall with stolen furniture. It would be fairly difficult – although the script I am using indicates that the theatre company that first used the script used projections for most of the props rather than three-dimensional objects – to find a stylized way around the props and furniture. Even if I could find a stylized alternative, I would not want to. First, the *Masterpiece Theatre*/operetta ideal that I’m puncturing requires realistic props. Second, one of the reasons I went to graduate school was to direct a show with full technical support in order to overcome things like my prop phobia and my tendency – born of

having off-off Broadway schedules of two days for tech and dress — to run quick, efficient techs, rather than meticulous, demanding techs.

After this production meeting, Nels, Marshal and I scheduled several other meetings to discuss set and props – both for the show and for rehearsals. At one of these meetings, I voiced my doubts about the live horse. As I raised the question of whether the live horse would come across as a parody of the excesses of opera or as simply excessive, I realized that, of course, it would come off as a parody. Nonetheless, having raised the question to make sure that my silence in the previous discussion had not locked me into anything that I would regret, I proceeded with the discussion. Nels and Marshal confirmed my understanding that they could think of no other options – we were using all the fly lines and, even if we had room for a fake horse, there was no way to get the rider up into the flies. Marshal suggested that the way we costumed – caparisoned – the horse could make it clear that it was a joke. I was now confident that the live horse would work.

I also met with Molly Buchman prior to the first rehearsal. We discussed the overture promenade and the dancing girls for “The Ballad of Mack the Knife.” She now seemed to understand what I was after. I felt better about that situation.

For the first full rehearsal I scheduled a design show and tell, a review of all of the music – so I could assess where we were –, and the choreography of the overture promenade and the “Ballad of Mack the Knife.” The music was in rough shape – which I anticipated, since I expected that a lot of the cast members would be irresponsible about practicing with the tapes. Concerns were again raised about Terry since he stumbled

through some of the music and, at the end of the evening, I nearly had to run up the aisle to prevent him from leaving before we had talked.

Molly's work on the promenade captured the essence of my idea – creating the illusion that we are in a very pretty, operetta world – and fleshed it out and gave it specificity. She started it off as an operetta pantomime and built into an overly enthusiastic musical theatre moment *a la Godspell*. While Molly worked with the dancing girls, I went into another room and worked with Craig Strassen, the actor playing the Ballad Singer. When I came back into the room, my wildest dreams were being exceeded. Molly had the girls with the flower baskets on the steps at the front of the stage circling the spot where the Ballad Singer would be. They looked like Gallic showgirls. This was exactly what I had in mind: a prettiness and frivolity that contrasted with the gory lyrics and the images that I intended to project during the number. When Craig stepped in, he immediately adopted a Maurice Chevalier flirtatiousness with great aplomb. This was a pleasant surprise. Craig had given a good audition, but he's young and inexperienced – I believe he's a freshman. I had not expected this kind of confidence, stage presence, and ability to come up with on-target choreographic ideas.

The next rehearsal also furnished a pleasant surprise. I had cast Marcy Melius as Mrs. Peachum. She had been in the chorus of my production of *Trojan Women* the year before. She was good, but I had never seen her in a major role. I knew that Nathan Frizell – Mr. Peachum – was confident performer and a very funny character actor, having seen him in several shows at LSU. When we worked on the song that we are translating as the “Why Can't They Song,” both of them showed panache of a good

vaudeville team. I did not know that Marcy had such confidence and was such a strong stage presence.

The next night we came to the wedding scene – my greatest fear. I had to contend with all the props and the complicated stage business that the actors had to do with them – such as sawing the legs off a harpsichord to turn it into a bench. It was also a scene with a lot of characters and many of these characters were being played by inexperienced actors. This was the scene for which I had felt so unprepared when I used it in auditions.

For this scene to work, each actor playing a gang-member would have to make very specific, very idiosyncratic character choices. I thought I would have to give them suggestions to get them going – I also planned to use these suggestions to give myself something to do and to anchor me while I figured out what to do with this huge mess of a scene. I had a few ideas prepared. One character is named Dreary Walt and the actor I cast in the part – Reed Wiley – came across as sullen and quirky at the audition. I planned to encourage him to use those personality traits to play Dreary Walt as dreary. The character Crookfingered Jake is always sulking about saying and doing the wrong things. I planned to give the actor, Rhys Malen, a similar suggestion to the one I had given Reed. Matt-of-the-Mint is always getting into fights with Mack, so I intended to suggest to Chaney Tullos that Matt was neurotically competitive with Mack.

After a first read-thru of the scene, I simply remarked that the actors needed to make very specific character choices, I did not yet throw out any of my ideas. On the next read-thru, Reed made a big choice without any coaching from me. He chose to be overeager. This was completely different from my idea, completely different from the impression I had gotten of him at the auditions, and worked quite well for him. I gave

my suggestions to Chaney and Rhys. Chaney tried my idea, didn't really need it, and eventually went off in his own direction. Rhys did go with the choice I gave him and, did OK with it, but I'm not sure that I should have said anything at all. In this case, I had underestimated my actors: they did not need as much guidance early on as I thought. I could say that I learned a lesson from this: trust the actors and leave them alone at early rehearsals. On the other hand, it has been my experience that any general rule you think you discover about working with actors is usually contradicted on the next production.

Another acting issue in the scene was that of dialects. Even though the play was originally written in German, it takes place in the London underworld and, in the translation we used, is written in that idiom. I felt that the humor of the lower class characters will come across better if we use accents. However, achieving consistency with a cast of twenty-seven undergraduates seemed difficult. I was aware from the auditions that both Nathan and Marcy could do cockney dialects. At the previous evening's rehearsal I found that Brian Nolan, who is playing Filch – a fallen member of the middle or upper class – could not do a standard British dialect. However, dialects are not important to me for the middle and upper class characters. They can speak in standard, educated, mid-Atlantic American accents. The fact that the lower class characters are speaking in dialect while the others are not could be explained away by class differences. Nonetheless, to use dialects, we would still need to achieve consistency among the lower class characters. At this rehearsal, I found that all but one of the actors playing gang-members could do passable cockney accents, and that the one who couldn't could, with a little work, get to the point where he was not conspicuous. Since the gang

made up a significant portion of the lower class characters, I felt confident in deciding to go ahead with the dialects.

My fears in regards to props and traffic management proved to be unfounded. Working the scene went smoothly. I found that I didn't even have to micromanage the stage business: once the actors had been given their entrances and exits and their rehearsal props, they were able to figure out the physical business themselves. Of course, there are things that we would not be able to figure out exactly until we got into tech, but during this rehearsal and the next, we were able to shape the scene. Most importantly, the gang-members were able to find a lot of life and playfulness. As far as my prop-phobia went, I had looked into the lion's mouth and found it was no big deal.

At the end of the week, I had a meeting with Kris. I now had doubts about the Tiger Band uniforms for the orchestra. It felt extraneous to the production. I had originally liked the idea because it made a nice counterpoint to the costuming of Pirate Jenny as an LSU custodial worker. However, Pirate Jenny doesn't come on until after intermission. At the beginning of the play, we are in the world of operetta, not LSU. It occurred to me that an operetta band would look like a country club band: blazers and light colored pants. Kris said she would see if she could find these and if she couldn't specifically get blazers – we were running out of money to buy costume pieces – she would find some kind of semi-formalwear that would be appropriate to operetta.

January 12th-17th, 2002

In scheduling rehearsals, I had decided to do a run-thru of everything we had worked in a given week every Saturday. Our first partial run on Saturday, the 12th went extraordinarily well. In fact, it went so well, it concerned me. I was afraid we were going

to peak too early. I am a firm believer in doing a lot of run-thrus. When I was an actor I always found that my performance came alive and impulses really started coming to me in the flow of a run-thru as opposed to the detail-work of a scene rehearsal. However, when I directed *Trojan Women* the year before, we had a very long rehearsal period and did more run-thrus than I had ever done. In that case, we did start to get stale and I had to find a way to re-invigorate the production. In this case, I had already drawn up a schedule for the second week, but I decided to slow down in the third week: do less plowing ahead with staging scenes and more drill and clean-up of technically complicated things like choreography.

Not only had the run-thru gone well, my anxieties about Terry were beginning to be alleviated. After the first rehearsal I told Terry that it was key that we hear the words to the songs; I was concerned about enunciation and volume. Throughout the week's music rehearsals, he had really focussed on this with the actors, even encouraging them to talk-sing in some places. The songs, both in this respect and others, were in much better shape than when I had first heard them. Maybe Terry wasn't as disorganized and as much of a clock-watcher as I feared or, if he was, it didn't interfere with his getting the job done.

There were some things that needed cleaning up. I have, as Barry has quite rightly pointed out, a tendency to settle, not to be meticulous and demanding. I decided to really work the things that needed work. First we had to clean up and alter the choreography for "The Ballad of Mack the Knife." This took longer than I expected. My desire to run an efficient rehearsal would often lead me to short change work like this. Instead, I let this rehearsal run overtime. When we really started to eat into the time for

the other things I wanted to work, and all that was left was some very precise fine tuning, I told Molly what I felt still needed work, told her that we would continue the work later, and asked her to choose a dance captain, so the dancers could rehearse when she wasn't there.

Next I worked with Nathan. "Peachum's Morning Hymn" had been difficult to hear and Nathan lacked presence at the start of the song. Also, he had rushed through Peachum's first speech.

Finally, I worked with Molly, Arlando, and Preston Lorio – the actor playing Tiger Brown – on "The Cannon Song." When Mack and Brown are singing I wanted Arlando and Preston to stand still and intensely sing into the boxing mic. During the instrumental bridges between the choruses and the verses, I wanted them doing a frenzied Charleston, to give the sense of psychotic soldiers who would rape, maim, and terrorize. The Charleston had not worked well when we first rehearsed it because Preston does not move well and Arlando is self-conscious about moving. The Charleston had gone much better in the run-thru and had gotten a lot of laughs. However, it was not what I was after: I wanted it to be more frightening than funny. Molly had been working with Arlando and Preston on the Charleston while I was working with Nathan. When they came back into the auditorium, we continued the work. By now, Arlando and Preston were clearly physically exhausted and unhappy. Normally, I would back off at this point, but I kept working it. As we were coming up on the end of the rehearsal, I had an idea, an idea I would usually not have voiced for fear of offending Molly. I asked Arlando and Preston to forget the specific choreography and just do their own version of the Charleston, but that the important thing was that they go ape-shit. This time, the

Charleston looked much closer to what I wanted; it was too sloppy and needed to be fine-tuned, but it had the right spirit. I told them that when we came back to “The Cannon Song” at next week’s run-thru – when Molly would be out of town – they should again forget the choreography and do their own frenzied Charleston. Later Molly could shape what they had done.

On Sunday we worked “The Ballad of Sexual Slavery” dream ballet. The first thing we discovered was that the situation with the male dancers – or, more to the point, non-dancers – was not as bad as Molly thought. They didn’t move well, but they weren’t terrible. One thing that helped was that they understood and used the excessively serious expressions of male ballet dancers, which conveyed that they were ballet dancers even if their skill did not – one actor in particular, Jonathan Shirley, nailed the look.

As Molly put the dance together, it became clear that the idea of going from exaggeratedly graceful ballet moves into raunchy poses was funny – it provoked hysterical laughter from everyone in the rehearsal room. However, when we ran sequences of the ballet, it was rough and, therefore, not very funny. While the guys were not as bad as we feared, we still had a lot of work to do.

On Tuesday, we finished the ballet and ran it in context. It was pretty shaky. We were also pressed for time. This was the first rehearsal that did not run according plan and that did not go as well or better than I expected. While my image of myself as a seasoned pro, who knows not to get complacent when things are going well, led me to be suspicious of how smoothly things were going, in my heart of hearts, I was reveling in how good the show looked so far. While I think that theatre people who use the phrase “result-oriented” as an epithet are idiots who fetishize “process,” I can be result-oriented

in a genuinely negative way: I crave recognition and applause. When things go badly, I make a production number of taking it in stride to show that I'm a pro, but inside, I get depressed and panicky – which was how I felt when I left rehearsal. In reality, the rehearsal was not that bad, it simply showed us that we had work to do – which is how it should be.

The next day Molly and I met to discuss the choreography for the “Jealousy Duet.” We also discussed how I was planning to proceed with rehearsals. I voiced my concerns about peaking early and getting stale, and said that I was considering slowing down. Molly advised me to continue moving forward to the end of the play, because in a musical, running choreography as often as possible is helpful. She also suggested adding a half-hour dance call – sometimes with her, sometimes with the dance captain Elizabeth Mathews – to each rehearsal. Since I had limited experience with musicals – I had remounted another director's production of a musical for children and done several Greek tragedies and Shakespeare plays with live music –, I decided to defer to Molly's judgement. I figured that once I finished staging the play, if it looked like we were getting stale we could work on choreography rather than doing run-thrus.

On Friday, I worked with Karly Pierre for the first time on “Pirate Jenny.” As I listened to her work on it musically with Terry, I found that she was singing it very low, very darkly and monotonously. She had a genuinely sinister quality – as opposed to what I have referred to as a Brecht/Weill/Weimar cliché – and it worked extraordinarily well. Over the last few years, I have started giving specific notes early in rehearsal. I find that it provides both the actors and me with something concrete to work with in the nebulous early stages of rehearsal. I mentioned above that this was unnecessary when I was

working with the gang and it turned out to be *completely* unnecessary when I was working with Karly. She *got* the idea of singing the song as an LSU custodial worker fantasizing about vengeance and flew with it. The song was sassy, chilling, and it rocked. I had gotten the idea from listening to a recording of Nina Simone singing the song. However, I thought Nina Simone overacted it. Karly was more subtle. I realize that if I am favorably comparing this performer to Nina Simone, I may well be working with someone who will have a substantial career.

January 19th – 24th, 2002

On Saturday, the 19th, after we had done a music rehearsal and Elizabeth had run a dance rehearsal, we did another run-thru. Once again it looked good – even the dream ballet looked O.K. I decided to stop worrying about it: the show was in good shape so far and, as problems arise, we will deal with them.

The show is coming across as very funny and enjoyable. We are, indeed, doing it in a sketch-comedy style. I started to become concerned that it might be too light, that it might lack a political edge. On the other hand, I've listened to recordings of Lotte Lenya – the original Low-Dive Jenny and Weill's wife (whose greatness, based on these recordings, escapes me) – and Ute Lemper – a contemporary German interpreter of Weill – and both sing Weill in a very light and easy-going manner. It is possible that the true style of this play – as I've discussed above – is light and ironic, not edgy and sinister – Karly's work being the exception to the rule.

Also, some of the production's political punch will not become apparent until costume and technical elements have been added. For example in "The Ballad of Mack the Knife," the showmanship of the Ballad-Singer and the use of the chorus girls is

coming across as light-hearted parody. Once the Ballad-Singer is costumed as a filthy, revolting homeless person, and projections of mutilated bodies are added, I hope the effect will become more darkly ironic.

As I thought about this, I became concerned that one projected image, which will definitely have a political edge, will be too offensive and make a political statement with which I disagree. As I mentioned above, I am planning to project a photo of the corpse of the U.S. soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu at the end of “The Cannon Song.” Up until this point in the song, we will have projected images of Third World people being brutalized by Westerners. The Mogadishu image will show some of the consequences of imperialism.

I was concerned, first of all, that the use of the image of this soldier’s corpse will be exploitive and in genuinely bad taste. It would be in worse taste than the photos of the Third World victims of imperialism, because they are being presented as victims, where the U.S. soldier is being presented as an oppressor who got his just deserts. Second, I think we were right to be in Somalia – it was a humanitarian mission. Third, I am not as unambivalently in sympathy with Third World opponents of Western imperialism as I imagine Brecht would be – Mohamed Farah Aidid is no Gandhi. On the other hand, of all the images that I am planning to use, this one most captures the harshness that I associate with Brecht.

I spoke to my roommate Kurt Heinlein – who is also doing fight choreography for the show – about the image and he did not think it was too offensive. As I was talking to Kurt, it occurred to me that the image might not only come across as showing an oppressor getting what he deserves, but might also be interpreted as saying that Third

World people are just as capable of brutality as Westerners. It might, indeed, make the point that not every opponent of Western imperialism is a saint.

I then spoke with Daniela Varon, a friend in New York, and she thought the image would be a Rorschach test – some people might walk away thinking the image means “look at what those fucking wogs do to Americans.” She also thought that with the previous image of the South Vietnamese Soldier shooting the Vietcong, my audience would have neither the historical knowledge nor the political sophistication to understand that that image attacks the United States for backing the South Vietnamese regime. I asked her if she thought I should replace that image with one of an atrocity being committed by an American. She thought I should keep the image because of its recognizability. She also thought that the overall message of the images would be “War is Hell” and not either an anti-Western or an anti-Third-World agenda. I was satisfied that, should I be asked about the Mogadishu image, I could say that it means both that imperialism breeds hatred and resentment which leads to atrocities like this and that Third World people are just as capable of brutality as Westerners.

At the start of Sunday’s rehearsal we brought in Artie – the horse – for the first time. Everything went fine: he was well-behaved, he fit through the auditorium doors, Preston was able to ride him and dismount, and he didn’t shit until he was almost out of the building. He relieved himself in a wing of the building used by the Music Department. Since the Theatre Department feels like the unloved stepsister of the Music Department, no one shed a tear.

When the full cast arrived, we staged the “Second Threepenny Finale” and worked on Act II, scene 3 – the first prison scene. The second finale is the play’s clearest

expression of Brecht's cynical anti-capitalist message. It is also the biggest showstopper in the play. It's funny, Vastine, who had done the show before, told me that my "money songs" were the "Pimp's Tango" and the "Jealousy Duet" – a sexy duet about prostitution and a bitch-fight – , whereas I see the show's most revolutionary number as the "money song." We'll see who has his hand on the pulse of popular culture.

The solos in the song are usually assigned to Mack and either Mrs. Peachum or Low-dive Jenny. I reassigned them to the Ballad Singer and Pirate Jenny for two reasons. First, because Karly is such a good singer, I wanted to give her a second song. Second, the Ballad Singer and Pirate Jenny are my two representatives of real-world poverty and should be singing the verses with the lyrics "First, feed the face and then talk right and wrong, " (MW, p.117).

For the refrain sung by the entire company – "For one you must try not to shirk the facts/Mankind is kept alive by bestial acts" – I'm having the actors slam open the doors to the auditorium and sing it directly in the faces of the audience.

The singing of the solos requires a snarling, sexy, snakey, aggression towards the audience. Both Craig and Karly are having difficulty getting this. Craig didn't quite understand it at first. When I explained what I was after, he so exaggerated the snarling that he would be dismissed by the audience rather than unsettling them. I explained this to him and he brought the snarling down. However, by the end of the rehearsal, he was just following directions: his aggression towards the audience was not yet internally grounded.

Karly is singing the song in her dark, monotonous Weillian drone. This is appropriate, but it lacks the punch that the song requires. This is a song that I would have to have to come back to and work.

I blocked Act II, scene 3 very quickly. Most of the notes I gave the actors were either technical – “cheat down” – or external – “give me a classic Joan Collins bitch pose.” It has evolved in rehearsals that this is, for the most part, the way that I am working. It feels right for this show. Right now the game plan is to continue to block through to the end of the show and then, once we have that structure, experiment, play, go deeper, fine tune.

On Monday, we staged Act III, scene 1, which includes the reprise of “The Ballad of Sexual Slavery.” The reprise has different lyrics from the first rendition of the song and Terry had not transcribed them into the score. This slowed us down and was part of a larger problem that has reawakened my concerns about Terry. Even though I was mixing and matching translations of lyrics, we did have to pay for the rights to one translation. The publishing house from which we leased the translation was to send us a complete score including instrumental parts. We did not have these scores until two weeks into rehearsal because, according Pat Acampora, the paper work we sent to the publishing house was held up at a New York post office that was being decontaminated for anthrax. So we started rehearsals with the score we had borrowed from Vastine, into which Terry had transcribed the lyrics. When the official scores arrived there were subtle differences between the score we had leased and the one we had been using. Since only the new score had the instrumental parts, Terry had to switch over. However, he did not

transcribe the lyrics into the new score. When actors who were trying to get off book had a question about the lyrics, Terry was unable to help them. This was slowing us down.

Once again my dislike of confrontation was being tested. I had to speak to Terry about this. On Tuesday or Wednesday, I asked him if he could transcribe the lyrics into the new score. He asked why. I told him that his not having the lyrics in the score in front of him was slowing us down. He said that he didn't have the time and that he didn't think Natalie would have the time either. He said that he could keep the score with the lyrics open nearby and that this would solve the problem. He added with passive-aggressive acidity that he "had done far too much of this kind of work already."

He was probably right. My working from multiple translations probably resulted in more transcription than was usual. I had also been getting a sense that Terry felt that his time was not being used efficiently. Terry would be used for music and dance rehearsals and then when I started work on a scene, he would either take a long break or sit around until I had read through the scene and worked it up to the point at which a song came in. Also, since this is a student production, I had been taking the best from the Equity and non-Equity worlds. I was adhering to the same kind of rehearsal schedule I would use for a Showcase – which is not exactly taxing – and I was planning to have an Equity contract tech schedule, but I was not rigorously adhering to an Equity break schedule.

However, I am intuiting all this. Terry had not spoken to me about these issues. Instead of confronting me, he was just doing a half-assed job – however, he was working very well with the singers. It seemed to me that Terry shares my fear of confrontation, but takes it to passive-aggressive extremes.

As far as the specific issue I had discussed with him: if keeping the score with the lyrics nearby put an end to the stumbling, then that would be fine and there would be no need to transcribe the lyrics again. If it didn't solve the problem, I would have to speak with Terry again. Nonetheless, I was not sure if I'd handled the situation as best I could. Perhaps I needed to speak to Terry about my more general concerns and ask him if he felt that his time was not being well used.

I had also been having problems with Natalie throughout. She is sweet, she is enthusiastic, but I think she thinks theatre is a cool, gossipy social scene and does not understand the huge amount of responsibility stage management entails. She had not familiarized herself with the script sufficiently and as a result she was confused when I would dictate a call. Also, she could not correct mistakes I make in putting a call together. When I gave her a list of things to do, she would not always do them immediately. When I gave her notes for the shops and designers, she did not understand them herself and so could not explain them to the people to whom they were directed. Also, she simply would put these notes in the rehearsal reports and would not follow up with the shops and designers to make sure that the notes were received and executed. However, the biggest problem was that she lacks the personality traits and intangible skills that a stage manager requires. She does not anticipate what will be needed next; she does not expect the worst and, therefore, check and double check until a task is done; and, most of all, she lacks common sense.

Throughout the rehearsal process, I had spoken to her about specific mistakes she had made. I also had a tendency to get irritable with her when she screwed up – both when the error was understandable and when it was not. I had considered having a more

general talk with her several times. But, every time I thought about what I would say, I found that I would simply be repeating all the specific criticisms I had already given her, which would probably increase the insecurity – and the screw-ups that insecurity leads to – she was already feeling as a result of my impatience.

These problems with Terry and Natalie would come to a head later in the week and I will come to them in the chronology.

On Tuesday, Molly and I worked with Arlando and Preston on “The Cannon Song.” Molly had asked them to work on their own frenzied Charleston while she worked on the dream ballet. When they came in and showed us what they had done, it was still too silly and not scary enough. I had asked them to have demented grins on their faces, but no matter how hard they tried, the expressions always looked happy and silly.

No one was really clear about what I was after. I said I wanted the moves to be infused with violence. I said I envisioned Charleston moves with a lot of slapping and knee-knocking – slapping the foot as it shot up to the side, the “bee’s knees.” I realized that aside from these two moves and clapping, there aren’t that many steps that fit the bill. Molly came up with one sequence in which Arlando and Preston faced front and alternated between clapping their hands, slapping their thighs, and slapping their feet as they kicked them up to the side. We found that it was scarier if they used deadpan expressions rather than demented grins. For the second instrumental bridge she had them do a “patty-cake.” Molly asked me if I wanted the violence of the “patty-cake” to escalate to the point at which they would slap each other. I said no, that when they

reached that point of violence, they should channel it into grabbing the boxing mic simultaneously.

These moves had the frightening quality I was after. I actually did want the choreography to have a comic element as well, but the violence was more important to me. I decided that this would be the choreography.

Thursday night, *le deluge*. We went through music rehearsal and dance rehearsal. I then started to continue work on the scene from the previous night. In terms of music, we still had one more song to incorporate into the scene, then we would need to go back and run the whole scene with all the music. As we were getting to the point at which we would incorporate the song, I saw that neither Terry nor Natalie was in the room. I asked Rachel East, the assistant stage manager to get Terry; we were ready for him. She came back into the room and told me that Natalie said he had left. I exploded. To what degree the explosion was spontaneous and to what degree it was calculated to put my foot down and make up for the fact that I had not had big talks with Terry or Natalie, I'm not sure. I told Rachel to "get Natalie in here, *now!*" At some point I threw my script across the room. When Natalie came in she told me that Terry had told her that he wasn't feeling well and that we could get along without him.

"How could you let him leave without telling me?!"

"He said you didn't need him!"

"If anything that important happens, you tell me! Give me your cell phone!"

I called Terry's house and his daughter answered. I did not yell at her, but I made no effort to disguise my impatience with her father. I regret that. He wasn't home yet. I told Terry's daughter to have him call me as soon as he got home.

I started to continue to work on the scene without music. The phone rang. Natalie picked up, it was Terry. She handed me the phone. I don't think I yelled at him, but I spoke sharply and forcefully. I asked him why he left. He told me he was having flu symptoms.

“How could you leave rehearsal without speaking to me?”

“I'm sorry, Alec! I'll see you Saturday, [the next rehearsal]” he pissily replied and hung up.

I decided to run the scene up until the point at which the new song occurred and have Arlando speak the lyrics to the song we'd already incorporated into the scene. I was able to control my anger enough to concentrate on the scene and give constructive notes in a relatively calm tone.

When we were done with the scene, I decided to call Terry back and have a calm, but forceful talk about what had happened, about the general problems I had with him, and about what I perceived as his dissatisfaction. His daughter answered the phone. She went to get Terry, then – as I expected – came back on the line and asked to take a message.

At this point, I thought it was a distinct possibility that I would fire Terry or that he would quit. I knew that my fear of confrontation as a director was being tested and that I could not accept unacceptable behavior – by the way, what was unacceptable was not that he left rehearsal because he was feeling sick, but that he had done so without telling me. I could also see him getting pissy about being spoken to sharply and quitting. Losing the music director could be a serious blow, particularly since he had hired the musicians and was the only one who had their contact information. Nonetheless, I could

not let fear of potential problems compel to accept the unacceptable. Also, I'd dealt with worse – losing my Prince Hal half-way through rehearsals for a rotating rep production of both *Henry IV, Parts 1 & 2*. We had two weeks until tech and three weeks until opening. There was time to deal with the problem if we lost Terry – in which case, we were very lucky that I had been working through the show so quickly.

I decided I had to call Michael Tick – the chair of the Theatre Department and producer of LSU Theatre – and alert him to the possibility that we might have to replace Terry. Much to my surprise, Natalie had Michael's cell phone number. I reached Michael. He, too, was surprised that Terry would leave without speaking to me. However, he kept repeating that it would be really bad to lose the music director in a way that suggested that he did not want to fire him. I told Michael I wanted to work it out, but that I would not accept unacceptable behavior. Michael said he would call Terry in the morning. It had not occurred to me to ask Michael to do this, but I realized he was the producer, not I, and that it was appropriate that he talk Terry.

The next morning I had a meeting with Molly to discuss the choreography for “The Third Threepenny Finale.” She was the ideal person to speak to. In addition to being supportive she informed me of some things I did not know about working on musicals. Specifically, that the music director is not always the rehearsal accompanist. I realized that I needed to find out from Michael whether, when he had hired Terry, he had made it clear to Terry that he would be doing both jobs.

At some point in the conversation, Michael came in and said he had spoken to Terry. He said that Terry left because he was feeling really sick and that he didn't speak to me because he didn't want to interrupt when I was working on the scene. Michael said

Terry said that he respected me as a director, that he was sorry if he'd offended me, that he was really into the project, and that he would be at Saturday's rehearsal no matter how sick he felt.

This apology came close enough to acknowledging the extreme irresponsibility of his behavior, that I was confident that I would not have to fire him. It also made it clear that he had no intention of quitting. However, I still had to talk to Michael to find out what he and Terry had discussed as to what the job entailed and I needed to talk to Terry about what I perceived as his unspoken dissatisfaction.

After the weekly production meeting, I went into Michael's office. I asked him if he had made it explicit to Terry that he would be both music director and rehearsal accompanist. He said that he hadn't, but that at this level no one has the luxury of having two separate people for those jobs. I told Michael that I had the sense that Terry felt his time wasn't being used efficiently. Michael concurred and now reported on a portion of the conversation he had withheld. Terry had said that I was having these five-hour rehearsals and he thought it was overkill. Michael thought the problem was that Terry was used to community theatre in which there are three-hour rehearsals. I asked Michael how much Terry was being paid. Fifteen hundred. I asked Michael if he thought that was enough for the time commitment I was requiring. He said probably not. I asked him if we could pay Terry more money, because I wasn't going to settle for less time. Michael said, he thought it was unlikely, but that he might be able to find another three or four hundred dollars and that I should have Terry call him.

I left a message for Terry. I emphasized that I was not upset because he had left rehearsal because he was feeling sick, but because he'd left without speaking to me. I

told him that Michael had told me that he had not wanted to interrupt me. I said, for future reference, he should interrupt me. I also said that I think we had different expectations and that he should call me to talk about them. I mentioned that if he felt he was not being paid enough to do what I was asking, Michael would try to find more money, but was making no promises.

Terry called me Saturday morning and said that he felt it was too late in the game for him to ask for a different schedule or more money. I thought that was admirable of him. However, I was somewhat frustrated that he did not take the opportunity I had given him to discuss the dissatisfaction I knew he was feeling.

I do have qualms about the fact that it might seem that I was rewarding his bad behavior by trying to find him more money. However, I believe that the bad behavior resulted from unspoken problems and that in raising the money question, I was addressing one of those problems. My one regret about the way I handled the situation is that I did not have “the big talk” with Terry. I did not do so because I felt that, after I had spoken so sharply to him and then had Michael speak to him, it would be going too far to push him on the other problems I had with him. I feel that I dealt with this situation more forcefully than I would have in the past, and that taking the next step will probably have to wait for the next production.

This was also the week in which I decided how we would handle the question of the authorship of the book and lyrics in the program. At the previous week’s production meeting, Pat had given the publishing house’s requirements for the title page of the program to Adam Miller, the LSU/Swine Palace publicist. The billing was as follows:

The Threepenny Opera
Book & Lyrics by Bertolt Brecht Music by Kurt Weill
English Adaptation by
Marc Blitzstein

Even though I always knew we would have to credit the translator of the version we officially leased, I felt a little uncomfortable listing Blitzstein as the adapter. This was not because I had anything against Blitzstein, but because I felt it was unfair to both him and the other translators whose lyrics we were using to credit Blitzstein for the songs he hadn't adapted. However, I knew that, even if we had the money to pay royalties to all the translators whose lyrics we were using, none of them would tolerate having their work adulterated and that if we credited them all in the program or did not adhere to the requirements of the Blitzstein adaptation, we would risk giving ourselves away.

Because of these contractual limitations, we could not credit the book and lyrics as being by Elisabeth Hauptmann and Bertolt Brecht or by Bertolt Brecht and Elisabeth Hauptmann. Adam and I decided to put an asterix next to Brecht's name and include the following parenthetical footnote: *(co-authored by Elisabeth Hauptman. Some lyrics based on the poems of Rudyard Kipling and Francois Villon). Since I think that the music is the most striking aspect of the show and since I do not find Kurt Weill loathsome, I asked Adam if we could put Weill's name on the left and Brecht's on the right – there's a political irony there. Adam said he didn't think it would be in violation of the contract.

Two days after I made this decision, Leigh Clemons – a Theatre professor, whose specialty is early 20th Century German theatre – gave me a packet of articles responding to Fuegi's book. She herself recalled that most of Fuegi's critics called him on minor errors of footnoting and documentation, but offered no serious challenge. What I found

was that none of the articles seriously refuted Fuegi's assertions about Brecht's behavior in respect of Stalinism – indeed, one of the articles simply said that this was not new news. However, some of the articles did seriously call into question – but not absolutely refute – Fuegi's claims about Elisabeth Hauptmann's authorship of *Threepenny Opera*.

I decided that the limitations of our leasing agreement had been fortuitous. They had led us to the most appropriate way of crediting Elisabeth Hauptmann. To have a footnote listing her as a co-author, but not prominently, could cover any possible version of the authorship: that she translated *The Beggars Opera* or that she wrote little, some or most of *The Threepenny Opera*.

January 26th-31st, 2002

On Saturday, we finished the work that was interrupted by Terry's departure and Molly choreographed the "Third Threepenny Finale." At the end of the day, we incorporated Artie into the finale. Again, everything went smoothly with Artie.

On Sunday, we ran the entire show for the first time. It was in good enough shape for a first run-thru, but, as I anticipated, those scenes – such as "The Ballad of Mack the Knife" and the wedding scene – which had had a lot of spontaneous energy, had lost their spark.

As I mentioned above, to keep from getting stale, I planned to alternate between detail work and run-thrus. After this run, we would do two days of detail work, followed by another run-thru. However, most of this detail work was not choreographic as I thought it would be, but scene work and work on projection, intelligibility, and dialects.

The two actors on whom I focussed most were Nathan and Jessica Warden – who is playing Low-Dive Jenny. As I mentioned above, I had seen Nathan in several LSU

productions, and found him to be a bravura, comedic character actor. However, as we rehearsed, I discovered that he was vocally weaker than I thought he was and that he was rushing. Therefore, he did not have the presence Peachum requires.

In our first session, I discovered we had different understandings of the part. I told him that, on one level, Peachum was a criminal mastermind *a' la* Professor Moriarty or Fagin. On another level, Peachum is the conscience of the play. Even though his actions are cynical and exploitive, there is a genuine moral outrage underlying that cynicism. Nathan responded that he had thought that Peachum was a buffoon. I told him, no, Peachum is the smartest character on the stage and that, if any character represents Brecht's point of view, it is Peachum. In performance terms, I told him that this meant he had to slow down and really take stage.

This work made a difference and Nathan's performance became stronger, more theatrical, and more sinister. However, he still lacked vocal power. In terms of his speaking voice, I had him work with Jo Curtis Lester – the LSU voice and speech instructor. The work she did with him had an effect at the time, but at the run-thru following his work with Jo Curtis, Nathan was, again, vocally weak. I scheduled another session with Jo Curtis for Nathan.

In terms of singing, Nathan's voice was weak half of the time. There is an inherent division to two of Peachum's songs. At the start of each verse in these songs, Peachum is playing the compassionate missionary and the vocal style is oratorical and churchy. Midway through the verse, he reveals his cynical side and the sound becomes harsh, staccato, and percussive. For the cynical parts of the song, Terry had worked with Nathan on talk-singing and it is very effective. But, Nathan was singing the churchy

parts of the song and his singing voice is too light and tentative. After our Wednesday run-thru, I scheduled time for Terry and I to work with Nathan on talk-singing.

Jessica has a physical disability: her face had been injured or is in some way malformed. Jessica has a beautiful, trained, legit singing voice. It is also very strong and powerful. However, her facial disability has affected her articulation when she speaks and people have had a difficult time understanding her when she is on stage.

Interestingly, she projects very well when she is singing, but usually does not project when she is speaking.

In her audition, Jessica surprised me. She spoke from her diaphragm in a very forceful, guttural way that was very appropriate to the whore's part for which she was auditioning. Also, in her singing of "The Pimps Tango," not only is her voice forceful, she uses a hands-on-hips, broad-stanced, masculine, sexual, Marlene Dietrich physicality, which is very right and gives her even more power. However, her vocal strength from the audition, and the strong sexuality of her singing of "The Pimp's Tango" had not carried over into her scene work.

Jessica is easily intimidated because of her lack of experience. So, when I gave her direction, she would do exactly what I told her, but she did not make it her own. What we end up with is a succession of moments, rather than a unified whole with a thru-line. When I was working with her on "Solomon Song," I gave her very specific direction for individual moments. Then I told her that throughout the song, she had to take her time, take stage, and use that Dietrich sexuality. The strength and sexuality infused the whole song and it was fluid, rather than choppy because Jessica was not just

executing a series of directions. I told her that this strength and sexuality had to infuse her whole performance, the scenes as well as the songs.

In Wednesday's run-thru, she did not apply this direction to the scenes. So, I put these scenes on the schedule for Thursday. I worked with her both vocally and on giving her scene work this strong, sexual undercurrent. She improved, but there was still work to be done.

That week I also worked with Craig and Karly on the second finale. Craig was still coming across as too grotesque to be taken seriously by the audience because of the way in which he had taken my note that he should snarl. I now told him that he should be quiet, seductive, and slinky and that should snake around the mic using his pelvis. At this point, I showed my age by asking the students in the room "who's that rock star that snakes around the mic with his pelvis?" They informed me that it was Axl Rose. "You kids with your rock and roll and your Axl Rose." This worked: Craig became much more genuinely sinister and less grotesque. He was still snarling at the beginning of the song. After Wednesday's run-thru, I told him to drop the snarling altogether.

The chorus of the second finale is in the style of a revolutionary anthem, even though the lyrics are cynical rather than utopian. Neither Craig nor Karly was giving the refrain the vocal force it needed. I told them what I wanted. Karly got it. Craig got it at first and then lost it. I should have given him a note and had them do it again. But I didn't. I also let it slide at Wednesday's run-thru. I gave Craig the note after the first run-thru of the following week.

At Friday's production meeting Nels asked me if I could have my assistant do the photo research for the slides because Nels was having to spend time helping the scene

painter with the backdrops. I ran into Rob Ray – my A.D. – right after the production meeting and asked him to do the research. I also started looking for some of the photos, myself. I couldn't find any stills or print versions of the Sally Struthers Christian Children's Fund ads. I was able to find some particularly piggy looking glamour shots of Sally Struthers and it occurred to me to put up three different slides simultaneously – Sally Struthers, a starving child, and "Give to the Christian Children's Fund" – rather than just a slide of Sally Struthers with a child and a slide of the text of the ad.

I went to the library to look for pictures of starving children. I looked for Time and Newsweek articles on the 1992-93 war and famine in Somalia. I found one shot of a Red Cross worker holding a child whose arms were so distorted by starvation that the child looked like one of Mengele's experiments.

The picture disturbed me deeply and I again began to get anxious about the use of the slides. I had gotten use to having a very funny, entertaining show. I realized that the slides could disturb and offend people and kill laughs for the scenes and applause for the songs. I also realized that people might walk out – particularly after the World Trade towers shot and the soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. I knew that a Brecht play should challenge people's assumptions and that I was lucky to be doing the show in a small Southern city where the show might actually offend people, rather than in a major city in which it would be old-hat. However, I didn't want to lose my audience.

The photo of the starving child raised other questions. Looking at that picture, I realized that using the Sally Struthers ad would be a piece of cheap camp and just using a photo of a starving child would be infinitely more powerful. I also realized that the

September 11th charity solicitation with the photo of the planes crashing into the towers would be a topical pot shot. I was a little concerned that my cutting this slide might be influenced by fear of people walking out. But, I do think it is the aesthetically right decision – just having the picture of the starving child with the text of a charity solicitation during Peachum’s speech is the most effective choice.

February 2nd-8th, 2002

A light hang was scheduled from nine to five on Saturday and Sunday, February 2nd and 3rd. We could not be in the theatre at our regular rehearsal times that weekend. We were able to switch Sunday’s rehearsal to the evening, but, due to scheduling conflicts, we could not switch the time of Saturday’s rehearsal, so we switched the location. It had initially occurred to me that I could use the fact that we were not on our set on Saturday to do an exercise to infuse some life and spontaneity back into the play. I planned on doing a speed-thru in which the actors ignored their blocking and just grabbed folding chairs to construct sets as they needed them. I have found that speed-thrus open actors up to impulses because they are working too fast to be self-conscious. I also thought that the absence of a set would lead to playfulness and experimentation.

I was aware that this is the kind of touchy-feely process stuff that young actors love and that it would enable me to show a different side of myself from the workman-like way in which I’d been directing this show.

However, after Wednesday’s run-thru I realized that this was not what we needed to do. The scenes that were in danger of being over-rehearsed just needed to be left alone as much as possible, and those scenes that were problematic needed to be worked.

On Saturday, Terry and I had a session with Nathan in which we worked on talk-singing the oratorical parts of the song. I told Nathan that even though I now wanted him to talk-sing both parts of the songs, they still had to be differentiated. The churchy parts needed to be round and fluid, even though they were being spoken, and the cynical parts needed remain staccato and percussive. As we progressed, I found that Nathan could go into a lower register and I encouraged him to do so. By the end of the session, the songs were better, but the churchy parts were still not quite what I wanted. I should have continued to work them, but I didn't. After Sunday's run-thru, I scheduled another session to work on the talk-singing.

We had that session on Tuesday and I found that Nathan's handling of the oratorical parts was fine, but that the cynical parts of the song were now not harsh and percussive enough. I worked with him a little on that and continued to give him notes on that throughout the week.

On Wednesday, Jo Curtis worked with both Nathan and Jessica. She worked very specifically with Nathan on using words as weapons. When I first started addressing Nathan's lack of theatricality and gravity in the role I had given him a couple of notes about using the language more. But, when I started to work with him, I focussed more on his conception of the character and getting him to slow down. This work made a difference. Now, Jo Curtis started working with him on language and it also made a significant difference. In the past, I would have felt humiliated that Jo Curtis had made a breakthrough with work that I was perfectly capable of doing, but had just let slip by the wayside. Now, I was just glad that she had done the work and that it had helped.

Later that evening we had our final run-thru before the *sitzprobe* with the band and before we went into tech. Other than a dip in energy in the scenes right before intermission, it was a good run and a good way to end before going into tech.

On Thursday we had the *sitzprobe*. Other than the fact that the drummer sent a sub to his first rehearsal, it went well. The difference between hearing recordings of this music and listening to it live is amazing. I liked the songs when I listened to them on CD, but I loved them the first time I heard them live, even though it was just a bunch of undergraduates stumbling through. And now, even though I had heard the music played by a full band on CDs, I was amazed at how fantastic the jazzy orchestrations were.

February 9th-13th

Tech and dress rehearsals

Friday night we started a dry tech. The set for Peachum's shop is a pair of slip stages that are wheeled on. The walls and roof of the shop are a cage-like structure which kept getting stuck on the scaffolding, lighting instruments, and cable. Nels and Chris Wood, the Tech Director, said they would cut down the height of the cages on Monday.

The slides were also a problem. Now, I wasn't worried about their offending people, I was worried about their being seen. There were two possible reasons for the dimness of the slides. 1. The screens were grey rather than white. 2. The slides had not been photographed in bright enough light. The slides were also not in the correct order and some were missing.

Normally, the dimness of the slides was something I would have let slide, out of my panicky desire to get through tech quickly and efficiently. However, this was

precisely the kind of habit that I was trying to overcome by doing technically complicated show. So, I grit my teeth and addressed the slide problem at the end of the rehearsal.

This took no great effort, since Nels was equally interested in solving the problem. At first he suggested putting white fabric on the screens. Chris and Pat raised both practical and aesthetic questions. The practical issue was getting the center screen down from the proscenium. Had this been the only problem, I would have had to stand firm and tell them to figure out a way to get it down. The aesthetic concern was that the grey screens blended with the set, whereas white screens would be eyesores.

Nels' response to the question of getting at the center screen was that he would just drape some fabric over the side screens on the following day. If it solved the problem, then we would do what was needed to get all the screens down and cover them. The aesthetic problem wasn't so easy. We all agreed that the grey looked good and that white would not. The weather was nice that weekend and Nels decided to re-shoot the slides in sunlight and see if that solved the problem.

I had allowed time to continue dry-tech the following morning – the actors were not called until after lunch. However, by the end of Friday evening, it was clear that we would not be finished by lunch. So, I decided that we would continue building the cues and working the scene changes with actors present.

The following day it took us until the dinner break to continue building the cues. I decided to skip the cue-to-cue and just start stumbling through the show with tech. As we progressed, I realized that a cue-to-cue is pointless in a show that is this tech-heavy. Since the cues are not that far apart, it doesn't save you much time, and it adds another phase to tech rehearsals.

I must admit that I was locked into a preconception of the proper way to run tech rehearsals. This preconception is based on how most of the shows I worked on as an actor were teched. You build cues in dry tech, you then add actors and go cue-to-cue, then you have a tech-run, then you have a tech-dress, and then you have as many dress rehearsals as have been built into the schedule. Working off-off Broadway, with one day to load in and two days to tech and dress, I've modified that schedule by going straight from cue-to-cue to final dress.

I found that this system – at least the cue-to-cue part of it – does not apply to this situation. Have I learned the lesson that when you are doing a technically complicated show and you have ample time for tech that you don't do cue-to-cues? Maybe. I'll find out as I do more technically complicated shows with ample tech time. The lesson I have learned is one I've been learning for a while: the most important thing is flexibility. You don't have that flexibility on off-off Broadway showcases because the actors are only getting expense money and, therefore, have to keep their day-jobs, and, therefore, need to get schedules in advance and have them adhered to. That flexibility is more possible in university theatre in which the senior production staff is paid and the actors and crew are students who are required to work on shows and have greater financial freedom than adult actors. I would imagine that flexibility is greatest on Equity contract show with large, paid production staffs.

The tech run went far more smoothly than I expected. The next day we had first dress. I was looking forward to seeing the costumes with some anxiety. As I mentioned, partially due to my difficulty with conflict and partially due to my trust of Kris based on *Trojan Women*, I had not objected when I saw that her sketches were more operetta –

and therefore more garish and obvious – than *Masterpiece Theater*, and I had let her come up with her own alternative to my trash bag idea for the Ballad Singer. The sketch she had showed me of the Ballad Singer’s costume looked like gladiatorial armor made out of trash – a pizza box, newspaper, a trash can lid. I had been worried that it would be more comic than disturbing. When I saw the costume, it was comic, but might make for a believable homeless person – maybe. As for the rest of the costumes, I was greatly relieved and pleased. First of all, they were beautiful. Second, they did clearly parody a romantic illusion of the Victorian underworld. And finally, I was able to have my cake and eat it, too: Kris had so exaggerated the costumes that they did have an Brecht/Weill/Weimar element of the bizarre.

When we started the dress rehearsal, the feeling of relief that the smooth tech run had engendered disappeared. The show as a lumbering mess – a lot of cues were being miscalled, but the biggest problem was that the scene changes were agonizing.

There were also acting problems. Arlando had tremendous energy, presence and charisma in the songs. However, in the scenes he frequently made to very low-key choices – acting casual and speaking with tight-lipped stillness. Both of these were appropriate choices for Mack, however he was playing these choices naturalistically, so they were out of synch with the style of the rest of the play and sucked the energy out of the scenes in which he made these choices. Nathan had similar problems. While he had not slid back to the hurried acting he had been doing earlier in rehearsals, his slower more sinister choices, as was the case with Arlando, now lacked energy and were too naturalistic. He, too was draining his scenes of energy. At the end of the rehearsal I gave them both notes on these problems.

Arlando and Nathan were not the only one's having vocal problems. For the last couple of weeks, it had become clear that many of the actors were hard to hear. This was, in part due to actors have problems with projection and diction and, in part, due to certain set pieces – Peachum's shop and the jailbars – that trapped the actors under the proscenium arch – the acoustically worst spot on the stage. When I realized this problem, I gave the actors speech and projection notes, but also decided to amplify speaking as well as the singing. Lewis' sound board operators were now proving to be somewhat erratic.

The next day, Chris Wood – the production manager – ran a scene shift rehearsal with the crew before the second dress. The scene changes were better, but still in need of improvement. I decided to add actors to the scene changes and decided to run a shift rehearsal myself the next day.

In the dress run, Arlando completely deleted the low-energy choices from his performance and was greatly improved. Nathan was erratic. His energy and theatricality was back up during the first act, but dropped in the second act. Up until the end of the first weekend I continued to give him notes – both technical notes – volume, pace, energy, filling pauses with tension – and basic acting notes – play your intentions. His performance remained erratic throughout the run. This was in part due to his having difficulty retaining adjustments, and in part due to the fact that the more notes that I gave him, the less comfortable I was in giving the notes; therefore, the notes were probably not as constructive as they could have been. My discomfort arose from the concern that the number of notes I was giving him would make him feel picked-on and undermine his confidence.

At this rehearsal, we switched in Nels' re-shot slides. Many of them were better. However, there were still slides that were hard to make out. The only solution would be switching to white screens. In this case, my hurried panic set in. I did not even raise the issue of changing the screens, because I thought we did not have time to do so in a way that would not look really ugly in terms of set design. With the photos the problem, in many cases, was not the slides, but the originals. In all the pictures of the soldier being dragged through the streets in Somalia, it is hard to recognize the body as a body, and it is impossible to recognize the context of the picture. We could not find any photos of the British committing atrocities – centuries of empire and not one picture of an atrocity – damn, the British are discreet. Rob ended up making a still of scene from *Gandhi* off a DVD. It was also difficult to make out what was going on in this picture. There were several photos that worked – one of them worked beautifully. Instead of using the picture of the South Vietnamese soldier shooting the Viet Cong, we used the famous photo of the naked Vietnamese girl running down street with U.S. Soldiers in the background. The picture was clear, beautifully composed and worked really well with “The Cannon Song.”

I probably should have made the decision to cut the photos – as a whole they did not work. However, I had pared down my means of puncturing the operetta illusion to such a few, that I was loathe to cut any of them.

The next day, after I had run the shift rehearsal and added the actors to the scene changes, the transitions were faster, but still not fast enough. This was our final dress. Marshall invited a small group of people from her church. Their big comment to her was that they had difficulty hearing during the first half our of the show. I realized that they were probably referring to the gang in the wedding scene. They were hard to understand

because of the dialects. I had not noticed this problem in rehearsal, because I knew the script so well and because the scene was getting huge laughs because the other cast members – who also knew the script – found their friends goofy and cute. On the following day, I worked with the gang on enunciation and projection. However, this was a problem that would never satisfactorily be solved.

February 14th

Opening

On Opening night the show had improved further. Many of the above-mentioned problems – in particular slow scene changes and difficulty understanding the actors – remained. The audience response seemed enthusiastic.

CONCLUSION

I set several challenges for myself in directing *The Threepenny Opera*. To serve this play I felt I had to put aside my hostility to Brecht's politics – particularly since the play, itself, contained nothing I disagreed with. Since *Threepenny* is a piece of didactic theatre that I find exciting, I would have to put aside my dislike of didactic theatre in general and make bold political statements that I might find reductive. In order to use what I understand to be Brecht's alienation techniques, I would have to put aside my own tendency towards directorial unobtrusiveness. I needed to do all of the above without sacrificing taste and judgement.

Another challenge in directing Brecht is determining the acting style. What is “epic” acting? Is it something I wanted to make use of? If so, would I be successful in working with the actors in this style? In addition to this, I faced the normal challenges of working with actors.

Aside from the challenges particular to working on a Brecht play, this was my first time directing a play with lavish production resources and dealing with the responsibility that entails. It was also my first time directing a large-scale musical. As always, I needed continue to overcome those “human” problems – the need to be liked and fear of confrontation – that get in my way as a director.

The Challenges of Directing Brecht

On one level, I was successful in embracing the political boldness of didactic theatre and in using alienation techniques to do so. Making the Ballad Singer and Pirate Jenny victims of contemporary economic injustice was a clear, unabashed political statement. In my use of projections of photographs, I did not back away from using harsh

images that were potentially offensive – with one exception. One comment I received from several audience members was that the choice of slides during “The Cannon Song” – the British in India, Vietnam, Mogadishu – were too far removed from the events of today. To truly compel the audience to apply the song’s attack on imperialism to the world around them, I should have used images of the war in Afghanistan. While I agree with their point, were I to do the play again, I would not use images of the current war. I couldn’t bring myself to use a war in response to attacks that deliberately targeted tens of thousands of civilians to make an anti-imperialist point. Since there is no text in the play relevant to the complexities of this current war, any statement I could make using non-textual devices would inevitably be simplistic.

In coming up with the unifying idea of puncturing an idealized operetta illusion with images of harsh reality, I was able to avoid being haphazard and gratuitous theatrical in my use of alienation effects. This unifying idea led me to pare down those puncturing, alienating moments to a select few. With the exception of my not using images of the Afghan War in “The Cannon Song,” all the ideas that were discarded, were dropped because they lacked the impact of those that made the final cut, not because they were too offensive or politically crude. The problem with this paring down was that I ended up being reliant on a very few moments to puncture the fantasy and make political points. Of these moments, “Pirate Jenny” was the most successful. The Ballad Singer’s costume was too comic and was therefore not as disturbing as I wanted it to be. When certain slides did not prove effective, I lost some of the precious few moments of harsh reality.

I was able to put aside my objections to Brecht’s complicity with Stalinism until I read his self-martyring lyric in “Solomon Song.” This led me to insert my own lyric

attacking Brecht for that complicity. I do not think this had a detrimental effect on the play – in fact, it was one the show’s most genuinely Brechtian moments. However, having set myself the task of not letting my political differences with Brecht affect my work on the show, I should not have indulged in taking this swipe at him.

Acting

For the most part, the actors were playing archetypes from popular culture – criminals out of a film adaptation of Dickens. At specific moments – “Melodrama” and “Polly’s Song,” Tiger Brown’s poetic pining for Mack, etc. – the acting crossed over into a parody of melodrama. I think this mostly worked. I could have toned down the parody in some places – indeed, I do have a problem with not reigning in actors when I am working on comedy. I do believe the style in which the actors worked was a form of “epic” acting. It is not the same kind of “epic” acting one would use in *Mother Courage*, but an actor who is playing parody does comment on the actions of his/her character.

The idea of getting at “epic” acting by having the actors read the introductions to the scenes might have worked, but I just told the actors to do it without really working with them on it. As a result, we just went through the motions of this idea without seriously making use of it. Also, the elaborateness of the costumes undercut idea that these were actors speaking out character.

I probably took my decision to work through the show quickly, focussing on externals, too far. Although I did have ample time to go back and work on specific problems once we had worked through the show and did so, by waiting until the entire play was staged, I let these problems go unchecked for too long.

I received a couple of audience comments that while Mack had genuine sexuality and menace in the songs, he lacked those qualities in the scenes. That is something that I did not notice and should have.

The Challenges of a Technically Elaborate Musical

I have now directed a show with significant production support and the attendant responsibilities of shop deadlines and difficult tech rehearsals. I feel that if I were hired by a professional theatre with substantial resources, I would be able to acquit myself well. For the most part, I was meticulous and demanding during tech. The one point on which I let a problem slip by the wayside was that of the slide screens. But what I found is that even when you have more than two days to tech a show, the temptation to bypass problems when time starts to run out is great and that it takes a lot of discipline and strength to hold firm and deal with the problem until it is resolved. I intend to continue to acquire that discipline and strength.

As far as the problem of the scene changes slowing down the show, an audience member commented to me that the songs at the ends of the scenes were meant to cover the scene changes. I mentioned this to Molly and she concurred. Because I did not get this comment until after the show had opened, I could not restage those songs. However, I have learned something about musicals which I can use in the future.

Human Problems

The fact that I was so conscious of these issues indicates that I have a long way to go in overcoming them. Had I talked to Terry and Natalie about the broad problems we were having early on, we probably would not have had the big melodramatic explosion

that we eventually got. There would have been no need for “tough talk” had I discussed the problems thoroughly as soon as they arose.

Final Thought

Because of Brecht’s reputation for being dark and edgy, I did not think of *Threepenny* as unabashed comedy. I was wrong. It was a joy to work on and I accomplished the goal that Barry and I had initially set – I directed a comedy.

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VITA

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