drama and music at bennington present

MAHAGONNY
SONGSPIEL
WORDS BY BERTOLT BRECHT, MUSIC BY KURT WEILL
DIRECTED BY JEAN RANDICH

may 7, friday --- may 8, saturday --- may 9, sunday
lester martin theater / spring 2010
MAHAGONNY SONG LYRICS

In compiling English versions of the lyrics for this program, we referred to the work of the following Brecht translators: W. H. Auden, Eric Bentley, Michael Feingold, and Ralph Mannheim. The Alabama Song (Nr. 2) and Benares Song (Nr. 4), originally written in broken English, are not included below.

1. Off to Mahagonny!

Off to Mahagonny
The air is cool and fresh
There's horse flesh there and
whore's flesh too
Whiskey and poker games

Gorgeous green
Moon of Alabama
Light the way
Underneath our shirts today
We've got cash with which to pay
For a great big grin
From your big stupid mouth.

Off to Mahagonny
The wind is in the east
Raw meat for sale on every street
And no bureaucracy

Gorgeous green
Moon of Alabama
Light the way
Underneath our shirts today
We've got cash with which to pay
For a great big grin
From your big stupid mouth.

Off to Mahagonny
The sails are blowing wide
The syph-symph-shhyph-civilized
Will soon be purified.
Moon of Alabama
Light the way
Underneath our shirts today
We've got cash with which to pay
For a great big grin
From your big stupid mouth.

3. Life in Mahagonny

To stay in Mahagonny
You'd need about five bucks a day
But if you liked to party
You'd need a little extra.

Back then they all hung out
In Mahagonny's Poker-Drink salon.
They lost every hand
But they got off on it!

On the sea
And on land
Everyone gets skinned
So they sit around and sell their skins

But they got off on it!

On the sea
And on land
You see the mills of God
Almighty grinding
That's why many people sit here
Selling many people's skins here
For they like to call the tune
But do not like to pay the piper.

If you hole up in your house
You don't need five bucks a day
And if you're not without a spouse
Perhaps you won't need that bit extra.

But today they all are sitting
In the Dear Lord's cheap salon.
They win every time
But they get nothing out of it!
The songs, considered in order, tell a skeletal story similar to that of the opera Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny. As renowned Weill scholar David Drew writes, "The fleshpots of Mahagonny attract many visitors, but prove disappointing and expensive; God orders the inhabitants to hell, but they revolt, claiming they are there already" (Kurt Weill: A Handbook (U. of California Press, 1987), p. 171).

KURT WEILL (1900-1950) Born in Germany, came to the US in 1935. Composer of the Threepenny Opera, Mahagonny, Lady in the Dark, Street Scene and many other innovative works for the theater. His extensive list of works also includes well-known songs and instrumental music, preserved on innumerable recordings. One of the most versatile and influential theater composers of the twentieth century.

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DRAMATURGE’S NOTE

The tumultuous Weimar era of the early twentieth century, born from the atrocities of WWI, has come to represent the struggle for stability in the midst of economic and social crisis. Despite its every hardship, this era saw an astonishing outpouring of creativity in every conceivable artistic medium— from painting and music, to architecture and literature. Piscator and the German expressionists certainly did their part to bring modernity to the theatre, but traditional, melodramatic operas and plays still constituted the more popular fare of the time. Meanwhile, Bertolt Brecht’s vision was to reaffirm theatre as an art form that transcended mere entertainment.
Brecht completely rejected the concept of Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk, a production in which the individual elements of a performance (music, text, dance, etc.) harmoniously synthesize to form a "total art work." Brecht regarded this kind of theatre as vapid, saccharine, and tantamount to emotional masturbation. By distancing the audience from the performance and preventing them from forming empathetic attachments to characters, Brecht urges his audience to think critically and relate what is seen onstage to their own lives.

*Mahagonny Songspiel* functions just this way. The first of several, notable collaborations between Brecht and the composer Kurt Weill, *Mahagonny* employs a juxtaposition of highbrow and lowbrow elements to obliterate our preconceptions of dramatic and operatic performance. Weill's music combines sophisticated classical composition with the gritty, soulful style of American jazz and German cabaret songs. There is no conventional plot line and no defined characters with whom we can sympathize. Such distancing effects serve to allow Brecht's philosophical message about society come across as clearly and as brutally as possible. *Mahagonny* is a parable about the destructive power of capitalism in which prosperity and possibility give way to ferocious and unbridled greed. And although this songspiel is very much a product of the 1920's, Brecht easily could have been writing about American culture today and the imminent collapse it is currently facing. The third song *Wer in Mahagonny blieb*
scrutinizing the Red Shirts in Thailand and the Black Shirts in Athens. We began to discover how to tap into the impulses of these gestures in our bodies. We had fun physicalizing the action in a way that Weill would say "excludes all doubt and misunderstanding about the incident in question."

More than anything, it has been thrilling, liberating, and fun. I'd like to thank everyone in the Mahagonny cast, orchestra, creative team, crew, and you, the audience, for going to Mahagonny with us.

In closing, here is Brecht interviewing Brecht on Mahagonny:

Why is Mahagonny an opera? Because its basic attitude is that of an opera: that is to say, culinary.
Does Mahagonny adopt a hedonistic approach? It does.
Is Mahagonny an experience? It is an experience.
For ...Mahagonny is a piece of fun.

Have fun! Think about it. Ask why.

Jean Randich
May 2010

CAST
Jessie Amelia Meath
Bessie Eliza McKelway
Charlie Danny Brylow
Billy Carl Johansen
Bobby Josh Gulotta
Jimmy George James

stagehands
Diaz Alex Diaz
Glickman Dmitri Glickman
Hippensteel Maya Hippensteel
Johnson Laurel Johnson

CREATIVE TEAM
Direction Jean Randich
Music Direction John Eagle
Conductor Tom Bergeron
Instrumental & Vocal Preparation Tom Bogdan
Set & Video Design Sue Rees
Lighting Design  Michael Chybowski
Costume Design  Emily Woods Hogue
Sound Design  Julian Chapman
Leigh Needham
Fight Consultant  Christopher Edwards
Dramaturge  Katie Kierstead
Technical Director  Michael Rancourt
Master Electrician  Robert Post
Music Technician  Dan Roninson
Stage Manager  Olivia Murphy
Assistant Director  Jon Burklund
Assistant Costume Designer  Alex Cassanos
Assistant Light Designer  Webster Marsh

ORCHESTRA
Instrumental Preparation  Tom Bergeron
Piano  John Eagle
Violin  Emily Call
Emma Piazza
Clarinet  Simone Adler
Clarinet, Bass Clarinet, Alto Sax  Kim Nucci
Alto Sax  Stephen Piccarella
Trumpet  Keenan Walsh
Amitai Gross
Trombone  Jessie Miglus
Percussion  Conner Dolson
Peter Reale
PRE-SHOW BAND
Atticus Lazenby - Piano and Tenor Saxophone, Ben Broderick Phillips - Bass, Ben Howe - Drums

SPECIAL THANKS
All involved in this production would like to thank the drama and music faculty, Suzanne Jones, Linda Hurley, Bruce Williamson, Nick Brooke, Dana Reitz, Theo Koppel, Mass Moa, The President’s Office, Yoshiko Sato and Kanako Seki. We couldn’t have done it without you.

ELECTRICS CREW
Ilana Stuelpner, Alex Doyle, Betsy Rupp, Aisha Cruse, David Brinkman, Webster Marsh, Jessie Miglus, Jordan Kaplan
WARDROBE CREW
Farhad Mirza, Chelsea Bernard, Allie Mandel-Lees, Connie Panzariello

RUN CREW
Light board operator: Amanda Buckley
Projector operators: Jonah Lipsky and Kristen Gremillion
Follow Spot Operators: Sage Savage and Nina Swistel

SCENE SHOP
Regular Scene Shop Workers
Jon Burklund, Corina Dalzell, Isabella Hreljanovic, Jonah Lipsky
Carl Johanson, Brandon LaDue, Ezra Lowrey, Katy Nelson,
Grady O'Neil, Emily Reid

Scene Shop Lab Crew
Catherine Weingarten, Farhad Mirza, Andrew Fridae, Eugene Kim, Amanda Campbell, Kelly Ward, Abigail Walzer, Corey Mandel, Laurel Johnson, Anna Green

COSTUME SHOP STAFF
Special thanks to Terry Teitelbaum, Mimi Bain, Madison Best, Megan Diehl, Emily Krug, Sierra Marcum, Devan Marques, Jama McMahon, Jessie Miglus, Kaitee Tredway, Emily Woods Hogue

LAB CREW
Chelsea Bernard, Farhad Mirza, Connie Panzariello, Allie Lees, Forest Purnell

MAKE-UP
Mimi Bain and Erica Baffa
5. God in Mahagonny

MEN:
One morning when the sky was grey
During the whiskey
God came to Mahagonny
God came to Mahagonny.
During the whiskey
We recognized God in Mahagonny.

GOD:
Insatiable sponges
Lapping up my harvest year by year!
Little have you reckoned with your Maker!
Are you ready now when I appear?

WOMEN:
Saw what they were, the people of Mahagonny:
Yes, answered the people of Mahagonny.

MEN:
One morning when the sky was grey
During the whiskey
God came to Mahagonny
God came to Mahagonny.
You came to Mahagonny
You came to Mahagonny.
During the whiskey
Got going in Mahagonny.

You came to Mahagonny
You came to Mahagonny.
During the whiskey
Got going in Mahagonny.

We won’t budge a foot now!
We’ll go on strike! We will never
Let you drag us off to Hell forever
For, we are in Hell and always have been.

JESSIE:
They looked at God, the people of Mahagonny:
No, answered the people of Mahagonny!

ALL:
Saw what they were, the people of Mahagonny:
No, answered the people of Mahagonny!

6. Finale

People only dream of Mahagonny
Because the world is so rotten;
There is no peace in us—
No unity—
And there is nothing one can depend on.

But Mahagonny
Doesn’t exist;
For Mahagonny
Never occurred.
For Mahagonny
Is only a made-up word.
tells an all-too familiar tale of the high cost of living. “Everyone gets skinned, so they sell their skins for dollars.” People are being consumed; humanity itself loses all value. “The skins are cheap but the whiskey is expensive.” Brecht paints the pursuit of money as a card game in which participants lose every hand but “get off on it.” Brecht’s depiction of capitalism is a grim one, to be sure, but its relevance to our current economic crisis is uncanny. Furthermore, it is disheartening to observe that Western culture seems to have progressed so little from Brecht’s time. Brecht ardently believed in the power of art to teach people to think critically and to incite them to action, but his efforts have done nothing to prevent history from repeating itself. Does that mean, therefore, that Brecht’s work is a failure, or that to continue performing this kind of theatre is a waste of time?

Of course not. The most important thing we should take away from Mahagonny is that the power to change the world lies in our own hands. Too often we forget this. The “joke” at the end of the songspiel that “Mahagonny is only a made-up word” is as much a metatheatrical jab as a reminder that capitalism is just another social construction that we ourselves invented. We created it and we bear the responsibility for changing it. If we can only acknowledge this fact and motivate ourselves to act, we can stop the self-destruction of society in its tracks. Brecht and Weill present us with this choice: Do we break the cycle of violence, greed, and exploitation, or allow it to break us—again?

Mahagonny is a wake-up call and an invitation to revolution. Make
This essay is dedicated to the memory of Steven Bach, beloved professor and mentor.

Katie Kierstead

Drama Faculty and Staff

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