

THE THREEPENNY OPERA: LAYERS OF HISTORY

In 1928, *The Threepenny Opera* roared onto the Berlin stage and took the European continent by storm. Its off-Broadway production in 1954 made it a hit Stateside, and the opening number “Mack the Knife” has become a jazz standard, recorded by greats like Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald. Its dark, satirical style has inspired musicals like *Urinetown*, *Cabaret*, and *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, to name just a few. So what has made *Threepenny* such a massive international success? It has a timeless appeal – its history is layered in the past, present, and future.

The first layer is its source material: *The Beggar's Opera* by John Gay. The first of a genre called “ballad opera,” a precursor to what we would today call “light opera” (i.e. Gilbert and Sullivan), *Beggar's Opera* lampooned politics, society, and Italian opera, using for its music popular broadside ballads of the period with original lyrics by Gay. The new play was wildly popular upon its premiere in 1728; however, it made merciless fun of the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole, and greater censorship descended on British theatre as a result.

After being introduced to *Beggar's Opera* by his collaborator Elisabeth Hauptmann in 1927, Bertolt Brecht applied his emerging ideas of epic theatre to his adaptation of Gay's work, bringing a modern twist to the still-popular ballad opera. In epic theatre, the world of the play is clearly a construction. Brecht wanted to make theatre that would not be an illusion but rather make his audience see their world in a different way – to make “the strange look familiar and the familiar look strange.” In *Threepenny Opera*, he added a further layer by resetting the action from the early eighteenth century to the early nineteenth, on the eve of Queen Victoria's ascension to the throne. The choice to set it in such an industrial, class-ridden setting amongst the poorest of the poor reinforces the inequality and corruption of Brecht's seedy underworld.

And its final layer is today. *Threepenny Opera* is still an urgently important critique of class, wealth, and corruption with parallels to today's world. In tonight's performance, watch for all these layers of history as they intersect and create a world that speaks to audiences of yesterday, today, and hopefully tomorrow.

-Olivia Ochoa, Production Dramaturg