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Tom Jacobs

A bracingly contemporary century-old masterpiece

It's not hard to find parallels between modern-day America and Germany between the World Wars. The era's sexual freedom, flirtations with fascism and general sense of unease all feel eerily contemporary.

Arguably the most vivid artistic depiction of that time and place is "The Threepenny Opera" by playwright Bertolt Brecht and composer Kurt Weill. Nearly a century old — it premiered in 1928 — its hard-edged cynicism and brilliantly brittle score keep it remarkably fresh and bracing.

Equally entertaining and disquieting, it provides a disturbing depiction of a cynical, corrupt society that at times hits uncomfortably close to home.

"I love theater that picks up the rock and looks at what's crawling underneath," said Professor Annie Torsiglieri, who is directing the UC Santa Barbara theater and dance department's new production of the show. "I feel this play — and particularly, this version of the play — really does that."

"The Threepenny Opera," which runs Nov. 15-23 in the Performing Arts Theater on campus, has never lost its ability to shock. A loose adaptation of John Gay's 1728 "The Beggar's Opera," it centers on an utterly amoral criminal named Macheath. (He got his famous nickname when the opening song was adapted into the 1960s pop hit "Mack the Knife.")

A successful thief and serial bigamist, Macheath finds himself in trouble when the father of his fifth wife, who is a criminal himself, plots with a crooked police official to have him arrested and hung. But in this world, corruption is everywhere, and justice exists only in parody form.

Brecht was an avowed Marxist, and he conceived the play as a critique of capitalism. But Torsiglieri isn't emphasizing that theme, which she does not believe will resonate with contemporary audiences.

"What people can relate to is desperation," she said. "I'm focusing on the lengths desperate people will go to survive."

So why is "The Threepenny Opera" still startling after all these decades? "It's a dark comedy with a brilliant score," Torsiglieri said. "It keeps turning things on its head. It's funny, then not-funny. Sexy, and then twisted. The music is bouncy and jazzy, even when the song is about horrific things. I love that."

So does music director Brad Carroll, who notes Weill (who would go on to become a successful Broadway composer) incorporates sounds from classical music, jazz, cabaret and even military marches. No matter what genre the composer is borrowing from, "he always sticks a knife in it and twists it," Carroll said.

That score is most often performed by a seven-piece band, with everyone playing multiple instruments. This production has a stripped-down ensemble of two: Carroll on various keyboards, and the always-creative Jim Connelly on bass percussion. (Two of the actors who also play instruments will also join in occasionally, on flute and viola, respectively.)

"Jim will be playing assorted percussion instruments, including a trash can," said Carroll. "He makes magic on found objects. We haven't rewritten the score at all, but it's a whole new take on what's on the page."

The words on that page — and thus spoken by the actors — are by contemporary British playwright Simon Stephens, best-known for his popular stage adaptation of the book "The Curious Case of the Dog in the Nighttime." Torsiglieri chose his adaptation, created for a 2016 production at the National Theatre in London, among

the many available because “it does not pull punches. There are tons of f-bombs. It’s dark, funny and really juicy.”

Visually, her production is “almost European expressionist, in terms of the set and the way we are using our physicality,” she said. “That’s what the play calls for. There’s nothing cartoony, but it’s dialed up. The world we have created is larger than life.”

“We have set it in a crumbling old theater,” she continued. “We have no furniture. The only set pieces are three rolling ladders and a giant muslin screen. Each place is created with those items. The lighting is going to be very moody.

“We’re using old-fashioned footlights that give those weird shadows. The costumes are colorful and crazy — things that are pulled from different eras. So it’s sort of Victorian London, but it’s also now, as well as the near-future.”

Torsiglieri believes the play will be particularly resonant this election year. While she is not emphasizing any parallels between Brecht’s characters and any modern-day political figures, she believes audiences inundated with political news will be receptive to its themes — including the celebrity status of the amoral lead character.

“In part, this play is about the cult of personality,” she said, “and how desperate people sometimes will follow people they shouldn’t follow.”

“The Threepenny Opera” will be performed at 7:30 p.m. Nov. 15, 16, 21, 22 and 23, and at 2 p.m. Nov. 16, 17 and 23. Tickets are \$17 general admission or \$13 for students, faculty, staff or seniors. They are \$2 more the day of the performance. Information: (805) 893-2064, or go to

<https://theaterdance.ucsb.edu/news/event/1074>.

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