

# Legit

Regional

## Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny

(Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, L.A. Music Center, 3,098 seats, \$220 top)

By ALAN RICH

A Los Angeles Opera presentation of an opera in three acts by Kurt Weill, libretto by Bertolt Brecht, English translation by Michael Feingold. Conductor, James Conlon, with the Los Angeles Opera Orchestra and Chorus. Director, John Doyle.

Jenny Smith - Audra McDonald

Leocadia Begbick - Patti LuPone

Jimmy

McIntyre - Anthony Dean Griffey

Fatty the Bookkeeper - Robert Woerle

Trinity Moses - Donnie Ray Albert

Alaska Wolf Joe - Stephen Humes

Greeted, as will be its eternal fate, by a rousing round of cheers and an impressive chorus of dissent, the steel-edged masterpiece of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht howled its way into the Music Center over the weekend. A new production in body and intent, the handiwork above all of incoming music director James Conlon, this new "Mahagonny" brilliantly exposes (and that's the word) the agitprop turmoil of its time and place -- Germany on the brink of Nazi takeover, with a population willing to greet life's realities with sneers.

The edgy brilliance of "Mahagonny" is its success in blending music and drama in capturing this inevitability. Values and loyalties have vanished; anything goes.

Conlon, who has made a specialty of locating the accent of music over and under the shadow of German rule, drives the score hard. A previous Music Center "Mahagonny," under Kent Nagano, tried harder to be pretty; this one aims at the jugular.

Much is gained by Thomas Hase's lighting: a barren set of traffic signals here, a stormy sky there.

Particularly successful in this regard is Audra McDonald's "heroine" Jenny, in a performance splendidly honed by director John Doyle from the role's usual sweetness to a fine fangs-at-the-readiness.

As her likable sap of a victim -- and victim, as well, of capitalism's worst impulses -- tenor Anthony Dean Griffey is just about perfect.

Fresh out of her apron strings in Broadway's "Sweeney Todd" (also directed by Doyle), Patti LuPone seems a younger-than-usual choice as the itinerant Madame Begbick, but she delivers a strong, menacing presence in the final trial scene.

"Mahagonny" reached, and horrified, its first audiences in 1930. The world was on the brink of change, opera along with it. The marvel of this production is that it lets us hear the gears grinding inexorably.

Sets, Mark Bailey; costumes, Ann Hould-Ward; lighting, Thomas C. Hase; sound, Dan Moses Schreier. Opened, reviewed Feb. 10, 2007; runs through March 4. Running time: 2 HOURS, 35 MIN.

With: John Easterlin, Derek Taylor, Mark Kelley, Catherine Ireland, Karen Vuong, Rena Harms, Natasha Flores, Sharmay Musacchio, Priti Gandhi.

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