

Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny

Bottom Line: As a political statement, the opera's moment probably has passed.

By Madeline Shaner

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While it's not cool to dislike or at least to not want to cuddle up with Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, the librettist and composer of this dramatic comic operatic musical -- I use all four words advisedly -- the current presentation of "Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny" at Los Angeles Opera may determine, once and for all, your point of view.

Michael Feingold's translation from German clings closely to its heritage language. The libretto stays true to the well-known plainspeak of Brechtian plays, which bridle at heat, emotion or, God forbid, sentiment. The songs were originally written for Brecht's "Mahagonny Song-spiel," an earlier concert collection. They are as unpoetic as Weill's music is unmusical except for some sweetly romantic piano intervals in the first act.

In English as they are sung and as they appear on the supertitles one has to tip one's hat to the brilliance of Feingold and the singers who have had to stuff such unequivocally Teutonic verbiage into the original musical format. Since there were supertitles anyway, it may have been better served by retaining the German lyrics.

Brecht-Weill's "anti-opera" (Brecht's term) is an anti-capitalist satire that slurps greedily at the dystopian fountains of Germany and Europe before the 1933 rise of Hitler and the coming Anschluss. Three deadbeats escaping jail -- Fatty the Bookkeeper (Robert Worle), Trinity Moses (Donnie Ray Albert) and Leocadia Begbick (the superb Patti LuPone in a role not quite right for her) -- break down in a no man's land and decide they will found a pleasure city where men (mostly) can have fun, whisky and money. Thus is founded Mahagonny, City of Gold.

Jimmy McIntyre (a superb Anthony Dean Griffey) and his buds, escaping seven years of mining in Alaska, find plenty to amuse them in the new town: the gals who've been shipped in by Begbick, including the gorgeous Jenny (a seductive Audra McDonald); an abundance of food and liquor; an absence of rules; and plenty of tranquility. In fact, the "just do it" tranquility quickly begins to pall on the escapees to paradise, and after a hurricane hits the new town, the innate rottenness of humanity creeps in on the backs of gluttony, wrath, envy, lust, pride, sloth and greed.

Men are their own worst enemies; the only valid stability is instability; the rich get richer; man's highest goal is a kind of heroic rottenness. Brecht's anti-capitalist satire is scarcely a story; it's a desperate search for a philosophy.

Mark Bailey's set design is simple, highlighted by flashing neon signs advertising sin in colorful neon and a prominent highway sign pointing to Mahagonny, on (satanic) Route 666, well accented by Thomas C. Hase's lighting and Dan Moses Schreier's sound design. Ann Hould-Ward's tacky-as-they-come costumes are rich in detail.

As a political statement, the opera's moment probably has passed, and whereas in its initial outing it became a polarizer between the right and left, its message falls on dead ears in today's climate.

RISE AND FALL OF THE CITY OF MAHAGONNY

Presented by the Los Angeles Opera

Credits: Composer: Kurt Weill; Libretto: Bertolt Brecht; English translation: Michael Feingold; Conductor: James Conlon; Director: John Doyle; Set designer: Mark Bailey; Costume designer: Ann Hould-Ward; Lighting designer: Thomas C. Hase; Sound designer: Dan Moses Schreier; Los Angeles Opera concertmaster: Stuart Canin; Los Angeles Opera chorus master: William Vendice; Text adaptation/Supertitles projection: Francis Rizzo. Cast: Jenny Smith: Audra McDonald; Leocadia Begbick: Patti LuPone; Jimmy McIntyre: Anthony Dean Griffey; Fatty the Bookkeeper: Robert Worle; Trinity Moses: Donnie Ray Albert; Jack O'Brien: John Easterlin; Bank Account Bill: Mel Ulrich; Alaska Wolf Joe: Steven Humes; Maidens of Mahagonny: Catherine Ireland, Karen Vuong, Rena Harms, Natasha Flores, Sharmay Musacchio, Priti Gandhi; Toby Higgins: Derek Taylor; A Man: Mark Kelley.