

# Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny

Reviewed By: Les Spindle  
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Audra McDonald and Anthony Dean Griffey  
in Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny  
(© Robert Millard)

The question that always lingers in the air about Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny, written in 1930 by the legendary team of librettist Bertolt Brecht and composer Kurt Weill, is whether it's truly an opera. The work's illustrious creators classified it as such, but its eclectic ingredients would seem to more accurately pinpoint it as a work of adventurous cross-pollination. Mahagonny blends Brecht's trademark presentational theatrical techniques -- emotional distancing, political didacticism, angry social satire -- with a score that includes flashes of cabaret, jazz, and Tin Pan Alley alongside traditional opera styles, including full-blown arias.

Whatever one chooses to call Mahagonny, Tony Award winner John Doyle's production for the Los Angeles Opera -- starring Broadway greats Audra McDonald and Patti LuPone -- is an eloquently conceived and generally successful resuscitation of this unusual piece, presented here in a translation by Michael Feingold.

As the story begins, three criminals on the lam -- brassy Leocadi Begbick (LuPone), Fatty the Bookkeeper (Robert Woerle), and Trinity Moses (Donnie Ray Albert) -- decide to create in an unspecified part of the U.S. a city that will be devoted to pleasure,

a place where men can have fun "because the world is rotten." Leocadi becomes a brothel madam as the townspeople revel in wine, women, song, and a fourth indulgent pleasure: boxing. Local resident Jimmy (Anthony Dean Griffey) falls for prostitute Jenny (McDonald) and they become lovers, but when Jimmy is sentenced to death for his unpaid debts, Jenny fails to stand beside him.

Brecht and Weill's cynical moral parable about a debauched society has strong political implications. The show was seen as an analogy for repression by the Nazi government, which may be why it was banned in Germany; but the universality of its themes can resonate in many social situations, times, and cultures.

Mahagonny is closer to being a sung-through piece than such other Brecht-Weill collaborations as *The Threepenny Opera* and *Happy End*. There's a bit of linking dialogue here and there, but the two-and-a-half hour show is essentially a series of solos and choral numbers. Despite the rich array of music in sundry genres and styles, the predominant feel is more classical than contemporary.

Doyle's sometimes static staging is perhaps what opera lovers expect, but it may strain the patience of musical theater buffs. However, the design elements of the production are very much in a Broadway vein. Mark Bailey's appealing sets enhance the narrative, starting with his flavorsome outdoor panoramas and progressing to the glitzy, Vegas-like later scenes, highlighted by brassy neon signs. Ann Hould-Ward's dazzling costumes run the gamut from the rustic garb of blue-collar workers to the brazen red and gold gowns worn by the ladies of the evening, and Thomas C. Hase's finely textured lighting is resplendent.

At the heart of the production is McDonald, with her soaring soprano voice and stunning presence; she appears to be relishing this lusty role, and gives a glowing performance. LuPone has much less to do in her supporting assignment, but she's in fine form vocally, singing at the very top of her range; and she continually strikes the proper attitude for her amoral, tough-broad character.

Griffey's voice is magnificent; he puts his arias across with consummate power and polish, and his characterization of the likable, doomed hero is credible and empathetic. Woerle and Albert are also outstanding, and the ensemble singing is solid, though the sound is sometimes marred by imperfect acoustic balance.

All in all, *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* is a fascinating evening that whets the appetite for future genre-bending efforts by the L.A. Opera.