

New Surry Theatre presents "Threepenny Opera"

By Emily Burnham
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In the New Surry Theatre's production of "Threepenny Opera," Jenny Diver (Cait Powell) tells Mrs. Peachum (Annie Poole) what she thinks of her; Betty, Molly and several beggars look on (L-R Becky Poole, Cherie Magnello, Seeta John, Nan Lincoln and Ian Richardson).

Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's "Threepenny Opera" is not a feel-good, carefree musical. It features thieves, prostitutes, murderers and corrupt cops in Victorian London, singing about the terrible things they have done and the difficult lives they led. If you're looking for "Oklahoma," you have come to the wrong place.

Yet, there's something strangely intoxicating about the dark, seamy underbelly exposed in the show. Weill and Brecht, the composer and playwright emblematic of the flourishing culture of post-World War I Weimar Republic Germany, wrote it in 1928. In 2010, it's as relevant and fascinating as ever — precisely why Shari John, a longtime member of the New Surry Theatre, wanted to direct it.

The NST's production, which premieres at 7 p.m. at the Blue Hill Town Hall, is the first version of "Threepenny" to go up in Maine in nearly 20 years. John directs the play, and Abigail Greene directs the music.

"This show was written more than 80 years ago. You'd think parts of it wouldn't be relevant anymore, but the opposite is true," said John. "The way it looks at humanity is

pretty unchanged. The way it portrays rich people and bankers has huge relevance to today's economic situation. It's still got lots of meaning."

While any fan of Frank Sinatra is familiar with "Mack the Knife," the song that opens up the show, "Threepenny" doesn't really have any other instantly recognizable songs, aside from perhaps "Pirate Jenny," famously interpreted by Nina Simone. The complexity and edginess of the story and the music mean it's not regularly performed by theater companies — but it's a richly rewarding experience for audiences who do get the chance to see it.

"It's definitely not like any other musical theater production out there. The music isn't bouncy and happy, even if it's really beautiful. It's dark, it's nasty, it's mean-spirited, and nobody really goes through any kind of revelation at the end," said John. "It's a satire of everything. It's a satire of society, of human nature and of theater itself."

Originally set to be performed last year, NST had to postpone "Threepenny" until now, which meant that several of the original actors John cast last summer were no longer able to do it. Fortunately, John didn't have too much trouble reassigning parts. The acting and stagecraft courses that the NST Performing Arts School offers each fall bring them new actors, such as Kateri Valliere, who plays the part of Polly Peachum. John took classes herself for years before moving on to directing.

"[The school] is such an important part of the NST," said Bill Raiten, artistic director for the NST, who founded the organization in 1972.

"It helps train actors, singers and directors so that they can bring professional-quality productions to the community, not only with the NST, but with other organizations as well. Becky Poole, who is in the play, also directs at the Brooklin School and will direct this summer's production of 'Damn Yankees,'" Raiten said. "Kateri works with Gilbert & Sullivan, Chris Candage is writing plays, John Chapin performs in Belfast and Deer Isle. This is what the NST has always dreamed about since its beginning."

Christopher Candage plays the main character, the dastardly but charming Macheath. Macheath finds himself in a world of trouble, as he marries Polly Peachum (Valliere), daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Peachum (Robin Jones and Annie Poole). Mr. Peachum, leader of the London beggars, tries to get Macheath arrested, but the London police chief, Tiger Brown (Jim Fisher), is Macheath's old army buddy. One of Macheath's many romantic dalliances, Jenny Diver (Cait Powell), turns Macheath in again, forcing Brown to actually arrest him. Macheath is ordered to be executed, and the show ends at the gallows — though there are multiple endings.

The silken-voiced Candage was seen as Hero in New Surry Theatre's 2008 production of "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum." For those not aware: Hero and Macheath are possibly the two most diametrically opposed characters in the history of theater. But Candage, also seen in NST's "Laughter on the 23rd Floor," was up for the challenge of playing against character.

“Macheath is a sociopath. There’s no redeeming him. But that’s not the point,” said Candage. “He’s a gangster and a philanderer, and it’s the only way he knows how to survive. He’s only out for himself. He’s definitely an antihero. But you can’t take your eyes off him.”

Despite all the unsavory aspects of the show, “Threepenny” is actually a great deal of fun. The costumes designed by Elena Bourakovsky range from Victorian finery to the fabulously trashy bustiers and knee-high stockings the prostitutes wear.

The music, of course, is in keeping with all of Weill’s work: equal parts jazz, classical, avant-garde music and folk song, that’s at once elegant, sad and funny.

“It’s not a comedy, but it’s not a serious show, either,” said John. “It’s a balance between the two. Too much of one side, and you lose all of the other.”

By shining a spotlight on the lowest of the low, Brecht and Weill created a scathing critique of society as a whole, examining what brings people to do evil acts, and what can be done to stop the cycle of cruelty and corruption in the world. It also happens to be deeply entertaining theater.

“Essentially, what these amoral characters are all saying is ‘Don’t judge us until you’ve been in our position. We’re just trying to survive,’” said John. “There’s evil inside everyone, and if you’re pushed by poverty or desperation, who knows what you’ll be driven to do. We’re all human, good or bad.”

The New Surry Theatre production of “Threepenny Opera” opens at 7 p.m. Friday, March 19. Shows are also at 7 p.m. March 20, 26, 27 and April 9 and 10, and at 3 p.m. March 21 and 28. All shows are at the Blue Hill Town Hall. Tickets are \$18, \$15 for seniors and students. For information, visit www.newsurrytheatre.org.