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Brecht to the future

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The Threepenny Opera, Donmar Warehouse

Tom Hollander (Macheath), Sharon Small (Polly Peachum), Tom Mannion (Mr Peachum), Tara Hugo (Jenny)

AS WE now know, Brecht regularly stole other people's work; but in the case of *The Threepenny Opera* he openly admitted that his source was John Gay. Whether his plagiarism of *The Beggar's Opera* was necessary or effective is another matter. Without Weill's music you have a script that adds surprisingly little to the original. Indeed, previous productions have left me feeling that Gay's point, that the lower depths are no more rackets than the upper social slopes, gets muzzied not sharpened during its journey through Bertolt's doctrinaire conscience.

But Phyllida Lloyd's splendidly inventive revival forces us doubters to think again. True, she has taken liberties with *The Threepenny Opera*, including the rather serious one of cutting the scene in which Macheath's wife, Polly Peachum, transforms his crime syndicate into a "respectable" banking business. But could she have achieved as much with 18th-century English as she does with Robert David Macdonald's colloquial translation of modern German? Gay did not provide her with the same opportunity to stage what we get at the Donmar: 2001, *A Spiv's Odyssey*.

Her futurism makes an advantage of much that now seems irrelevant or anachronistic in Gay and Brecht. Prince William is about to be crowned. The death penalty has been restored, though Macheath faces electrocution in front of a gloating TV audience instead of public hanging. And beggary and crime have spread and spread, until destitutes are organising demos that tax police violence to the limit. Can we really be sure that this won't be London in six years' time?

One could argue that, by equating Peachum's army of vagrants with our own homeless, Lloyd inadvertently suggests what recent evidence has tended to disprove: that those cadging alms in the Strand are actually a well-orchestrated load of petty profiteers. But that is not an objection likely to linger in the mind, for her revival is a lot harder hitting than the others I have seen. "Victoria's getting poorer than Calcutta," rasps Tom Mannion's Scottish Peachum in "Life's a Bitch", as the song "The World is Hard" has been retitled; and on slither shapes in dark sleeping bags, presumably to join his mainlining boy-tramps and girls with placards of "I have Aids, hug me" round their necks.

Macheath himself is played by Tom Hollander, on the face of it odd casting for the gentle, earnest actor I recall as Celia in an all-male *As You Like It*. But helped by a tiny moustache, a scar and an Essex-accented sneer, he gives a marvellously unsentimental performance. This is no gentleman-buccaneer surrounded by like-minded outcasts, but a mean, sly hood protected by louts in leather and sincere only when he sings "you have to kill your neighbour to survive, it's selfishness that keeps a man alive". The actors mourning or accelerating his journey to death-row are less impressive, though Tara Hugo's Jenny Diver makes an impact when she ironically celebrates his feats in lyrics as black as her petticoat. Again, Weill's worldly-wise music seems less textured than it might be. Even in the bland National revival of 1986, it left me thinking of coins, chains, the rattle of keys and the sound of bones being loaded into carts; here, it seems too cool, dry and thin.

But helped by Macdonald's abrasive text and Jeremy Sams's bold, witty rhymes, the production overcomes weaknesses that would sink many others. It is brisk and brazen, pointed and punchy, and altogether better than Brecht deserves.