



A LOOK AT SAN DIEGO'S STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

Close to home

UCSD's *Threepenny Opera* is an outlet for political frustrations, director says

BY MARTIN JONES WESTLIN

There's this fun little YouTube entry featuring Louis Armstrong's British premiere of the pop hit "Mack the Knife," which every singer in the universe (including the late Bobby Darin, whose name is most closely tied to it) eventually covered. The thing that makes the Armstrong installment interesting is that it's from 1956, the year of the lyricist's death. The *other* thing is that that lyricist—Bertolt Brecht, who wrote the words to Kurt Weill's music in 1928—never fancied himself a songwriter, at least not in the popular sense. He was too busy writing dirgelike plays about capitalist sellouts and The System's ingrained failures; such was the depth of his Marxist fervor.

He'd chuckle at the prospect of the millions his estate got from the tune and, conceivably, the attention all that money garnered from the wrong kind of people. After all, it was written as a theme from *The Threepenny Opera*, his scathing commentary on the fine line between ill-gotten gains and respectability. That line has dogged American commerce for as long as America's been America. And as UCSD's Department of Theatre and Dance

prepares to open its turn at the show on Friday, Jan. 28 (with a preview tonight, the 27th), director Jeff Wienckowski weighed in accordingly on the playwright, his so-called epic theater tradition and a system that encourages corruption in spite of itself.



Macheath (Zach Harrison) sets out to beat the good guys at their own game. (Photo by Colin McGurk)

The shows go on

See 'How They Did' for the dish on San Diego Musical Theatre's *The Story of My Life* and The Old Globe Theatre's *Jane Austen's Emma*, *A Musical Romantic Comedy*. The absence of an asterisk here means Marty or Lizzie either didn't like the show or haven't seen it. The listings are arranged in chronological order.

Opening

Wonder Wounded Heroes: Dangerous skirmishes and Shakespeare mix as siblings face off over a mysterious past. Produced by Ion Theatre Company, it opens in previews Jan. 26 at BLK BOX @ 6th & Penn, 3704 Sixth Ave. in Hillcrest. \$10-\$25. 619-600-5020, iontheatre.com

Death of a Salesman:

Salesman Willy Loman promises his clients the moon but never delivers the same in his private life. In previews, opens Jan. 27 at The Old Globe Theatre's Sheryl and Harvey White Theatre, 1363 Old Globe Way in Balboa Park. \$29-\$67. 619-23-GLOBE, oldglobe.org



Leading Ladies: Leo falls in love with a dowager's niece following a series of costume changes and mistaken identities. Opens Jan. 28 at Coronado Playhouse, 1835 Strand Way in Coronado. \$12.50-\$25, \$50 for catered dinner on opening night. 619-435-4856, coronadoplayhouse.com

Seussical, the Musical:

This piece integrates the storylines from more than 20 of Dr. Seuss' works, using each town and species of creature as inspiration. Produced by Actors Conservatory Theatre, it opens Jan. 28 at the Joan B. Kroc Theatre, 6611 University Ave. in the College Area. \$12-\$16. 858-777-9899,





Threepenny's lead figure is Macheath (Zach Harrison), who prefers to call himself a businessman instead of the gangster he is. Thieves like himself, he whines, are being edged out of capitalist societies by “legitimate” businesses and banks—so he figures he'll play their game, the same one he's been perfecting as a seasoned crook.

Brecht is after Jeff's heart

As he prepares to outwit a sea of bad cops and politicians, the play asks a central question: Who's the *real* criminal, the one who robs a bank or the one who founds it?

Wienckowski, who's set the play in the Great Depression, explained that Brecht “was just expressing his frustration with what was going on with the people at the time—exploitation by the government, the banking system robbing us blind, the institutions set up to protect us and not doing anything of value. That resonates with me, because in this day and age, I'm feeling that exact same frustration.

“We had this great hope that [President] Obama was going to come in and everything was going to be rosy, and the first thing that happened was the big bail-outs of the banks. That's not to say it's his fault or [former President George] Bush's or anybody else. It's just the system we live in.”

Epic theater challenges the art itself

Indeed. Under the capitalist equation, when you give something to someone, you've taken it from someone else. There's an inherent inequality there, Brecht seems to say, and he used the theater to express his dissatisfaction like no one before or since.

His plays don't require acting so much as speechifying; the language is sparse and direct, almost sketch-like in form and oratorical in content. This is characteristic of his epic tradition, which eschews theater's inherent class distinctions and insular climate—and Wienckowski's done his homework on how to get it right.

“Before I went into the process,” he said, “I was reading a lot of his theories on theater, and I was really interested in making things as dirty as possible, showing the act of theater as much as the story. The actors have found that distance between themselves and the characters, kind of forming these moments where the actor can push the character forward and then in the next instance comment on the character itself.”



Nothing to worry about, Mr. Peachum (Zachary Martens) reassures Tiger Brown (Mark Christine). (Photo by Jim Carmody)



Jeff Wienckowski can't help draw parallels between Brecht's castigations and the tenor of today. (Courtesy photo)

actsandiego.com

The Tragedy of the Commons: The Adamases' neighbor is selling his house, and the beautiful view—to say nothing of the fragile relationship between two people—is in jeopardy. Produced by Cygnet Theatre Company, it's in previews and opens Jan. 29 at The Old Town Theatre, 4040 Twigg St. in Old Town. \$24-\$49. 619-337-1525. cygnettheatre.com

Now playing

Once Upon a Mattress: Queen Aggravain has declared that Prince Dauntless may marry only the woman who passes her test. Produced by Patio Playhouse Youtheatre, it runs through Jan. 30 at Patio Playhouse, 201 E. Grand Ave. in Escondido. \$7-\$10. 760-746-6669, patioplayhouse.org

Barefoot in the Park: Newlyweds Paul and Corrie Bratter learn to live together in a tiny New York apartment. Produced by Moonlight Stage Productions, it runs through Feb. 6 at Avo Playhouse, 303 Main St. in Vista. \$30. 760-724-2110, moonlightstage.com

Shadowlands:

This is the true story of educator-author C.S. Lewis and the student who leaves behind an abusive husband for him. Through Feb. 6 at Poway Performing Arts Center, 13250 Poway Road in Poway. \$6-\$10. 858-679-8085, powpac.org



* **The Toughest Girl Alive:** Oceanside's Candy Kane performs her memoir of the same name, detailing her triumphs over countless adversities. Through Feb. 6 at MOXIE Theatre, 6663 El Cajon Blvd. in the College Area. \$22. 858-598-7620, moxietheatre.com

* Waving

Goodbye: Lily Blue and her estranged mother manage to patch things up even as their lives are woefully incomplete. Through Feb. 6 at New Village Arts, 2787 State St. in Carlsbad. \$20-\$40. 760-433-3245, newvillagearts.org



* **Two Pianos, Four Hands:** Ted and George dream of classical piano stardom and put up with just about everything to get there. Through Feb. 13 at North Coast Repertory Theatre, 987-D Lomas Santa Fe Dr. in Solana Beach. \$34-\$41. 858-481-1055, northcoastrep.org

Shotgun Wedding Anniversary: What happens after 25 years in a less-than-blissful marriage? For Basil and Petals, it can mean murder. Through Feb. 26 at Mystery Cafe, in the Imperial House restaurant, 505 Kalmia Road in Bankers Hill. \$59.50, including dinner. 619-460-6200, mysterycafe.net

* mixtape:

Generation X was torn between disillusionment and hope in this cavalcade of music from the 1980s. Produced



Wienckowski, a third-year MFA candidate who's mounting this play as his thesis, said he gained his directorial insights from those he worked under as an actor at UCSD and, before that, in L.A.

Change is in the air

“One of my great strengths,” he added, “is that I speak the actors' language. I'm able to talk to them on a level they understand instead of coming at them from an esoteric place. Whether we're dealing with psychological realism or doing something stylized, I think I'm able to use that knowledge that I gained as an actor to know how to navigate that.”

Sounds pretty Brechtian, this meat-and-potatoes approach. But for Wienckowski, those meat and potatoes are threatening to morph into the marketplace's steak *tartare*.

“The kind of theater that Brecht was rejecting, that real bourgeoisie theater, looks like it's coming back,” he explained. “I'm looking at challenging the way people experience theater and letting them come to their own decisions, which is what Brecht is all about—having the audience ask themselves 'do I care about these people and why' and, if they don't care, what that says about me and how I can change it.”

No. 1 song – but so what?



The cast looks like it's walking on eggshells lest it incur Macheath's wrath. (Photo by Colin McGurk)

great song, it's odd that Darin's talent would spiral it to No. 1 in the U.S. and Great Britain even as its central figure plundered the iconic inspirations behind it.

The Threepenny Opera runs through Feb. 5 at the Sheila and Hughes Potiker Theatre, 2910 La Jolla Village Drive. Tickets are \$8-\$20. For information, call 858-534-4574 or visit theatre.ucsd.edu.



The time has come

Turandot's vivacious Lise Lindstrom has awaited her cue the world over

BY CHARLENE BALDRIDGE

Seated next to us at a big round table two summers ago were an older couple, John and Bernice Lindstrom. Upon discovering my arts connection, John said, “Our daughter Lise is an opera singer”—and I thought, “Yeah, yeah, of course she is.” “As a matter of fact,” he said, “she's singing the title role in *Turandot* in San Diego in 2011.”

Well, it's time now for Lise Lindstrom's *Turandot* (the production with David Hockney's luscious set), which opens Saturday, Jan. 29, at the Civic Theatre Downtown as part of the San Diego Opera season—and I could not resist the interview when the opportunity arose.

by Lamb's
Players Theatre,
it runs through Feb. 27 at the Horton Grand
Theatre, 444 Fourth Ave. Downtown.
\$28-\$58. 619-437-0600, lambplayers.org



Beneath that kindly exterior, Bertolt Brecht fumed at the capitalist way of life. (Public domain photo)

Meanwhile, Macheath begs comparisons to guys like Al Capone, who Wienckowski said “was a notorious criminal who thought of himself as a legitimate businessman. Now, we have these gigantic corporate criminals. The Capones of the world have risen to the surface, and not only are the politicians doing nothing to stop it, they're perpetuating [the crimes].”

What's worse is they're doing it against their own better judgment. *That's* the tragedy that led to Macheath's emergence and, by extension, to “Mack the Knife.” While it's a

Lindstrom is tall, slim and blond. Personality and enthusiasm flow from every pore.



Turandot, in the person and voice of Lise Lindstrom, is not a very nice lady. (Image courtesy Florida Grand Opera)

She's been a thespian all her life, having been raised in Sonora by her late birth mother, Lindi, who taught high school music. Lindstrom attended show rehearsals from early on, and whenever a kid was needed, she was thrust into the show. She grew up stagewise and still loves the smell of backstage rigging and lumber, but she did not discover her voice until she went to college.

Mind-body connection

By now, she's been backstage at opera companies all over the world, including the Metropolitan Opera (she wowed New York with her *Turandot* in 2009), waiting for her entrance cue.

Asked how she conceives the mind-body connection, Lindstrom asked how much time I had.

"It's a concept that varies from artist to artist, from teacher to teacher," she said, "and is the crux of the singer's development. One must be willing to be instinctual as one travels the artistic path. To elaborate: Not every path is the

same, not every path works, not every teacher works, not every art form works. We are all intrinsically unique, thank goodness; however, it takes patience and persistence to find one's way, and I was lucky that after I tried so many other ways, mine clicked around the role of *Turandot*.

"All the crucial components to create a successful career came into play surrounding this role. It was the right time, the right place, the right thing—me, in my groove."

Reborn at the 11th hour

After grad school, Lindstrom knocked around New York, "six to seven years of not much." She was ready to give up singing entirely when, in October of 2003, Mobile Opera director Jerry Shannon asked her to sing *Turandot*. The rest, as they say every so often, is history.

Lindstrom says that singing *Turandot* requires an exaggerated addiction to adrenalin. The central character in the 1926 Puccini opera, set in ancient China, does not open her mouth until it's established that she is a monster who's executed 13 suitors who failed to answer the requisite three riddles. From then on, as she is wooed and conquered, the role is immense and stratospheric, and she gets to wear neat costumes.

"*Turandot* is not unlike the leading ladies we see in TV shows," she says, comparing her to women "who feel they must have a gigantic force field around them and be aggressive and assertive and that's the only way to be in the world."

'Humanity is at stake'

Friends tell the gregarious Lindstrom she should be more cautious in her personal life. "How do I do that?" she responded. "Asking me to change eye color would be easier. It's boggling that in an environment where art is so needed—because our humanity is at stake—that, rather than communicate on a human level, we talk about how open we are and that's a bad thing. When did showing your heart become a bad thing?"

Next up for Lindstrom is ... another *Turandot*, this time at Milan's La Scala. The San Diego entry is directed by Lotfi Mansouri and conducted by Edoardo Muller.

Turandot runs Jan. 29 through Feb. 6 at the Civic Theatre, 202 C St. \$35-\$195. 619-533-7000, www.sdopera.com

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