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Audra McDonald as Jenny Smith. Photo: Robert Millard

Audra McDonald dazzles in LA Opera's 'Mahagonny.' But why they even did it is a mystery.

**Kurt Weill – Bertolt Brecht
Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny
Los Angeles Opera
February 10, 2007**

By Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

On Feb. 10 in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles Opera covered new ground with the opening of a new production of Kurt Weill's "Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny." "Mahagonny" is categorized as an opera, but it really is a hybrid of sorts – a cross between opera, musical theater and cabaret, with a little of Bertolt Brecht's theater of alienation mixed in. One would think the work would be better suited for the Ahmanson or Pantages theaters which normally produce musical extravaganzas, so why did LA Opera take it on?

The answer is simple: Most opera aficionados assert that opera could be a dying art and that unless younger audiences are nurtured and learn to appreciate it, the genre might not survive.

Weill's "Mahagonny" is something different and might appeal to the younger crowd. Most opera buffs, however, would probably find it less than appealing. Although often atonal and dissonant, the music is at times melodic. In fact, I was singing "Alabama Song" while driving all the way home.

What Weill and Brecht have accomplished with the music and libretto is to cause audiences to contemplate the meaning of the opera and how it relates to society today. Weill is considered to be a militant humanist because he used theater as a vehicle to combat prejudice, intolerance and injustice. Brecht's type of epic theater doesn't allow us to become involved with the characters and action, but enables us to become spectators. "Mahagonny" wakes us up and makes us think.

Preceded by the "Mahagonny Songspiel," the expanded "Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny" premiered in Leipzig in 1930 after the success of Weill's "Threepenny Opera." The first productions of "Mahagonny" were greeted with Nazi riots. The Weimar Republic was coming to an end, and the Nazis were taking over Germany. Weill was forced to flee to Paris in 1933. Although most often performed in German, LA Opera's production of "Mahagonny" is sung in English, with an English translation by Michael Feingold.

THE STORY

As fugitives from justice, Leocadia Begbick, Fatty the Bookkeeper and Trinity Moses are first seen onstage in a broken-down truck in the desert of Anywhere, U.S.A. Since life is filled with so much misery, Begbick decides to found the city of Mahagonny, where nothing is forbidden: not sex for money, since Jimmy McIntyre buys Jenny Smith; not excessive eating, since Fatty the Bookkeeper kills himself while being a glutton; not fighting, since Trinity Moses kills Alaska Wolf Joe in a pantomimed boxing match; and not boozing. The only crime in the city of Mahagonny is an inability to pay the bar bill, for which Jimmy is tried, condemned and executed, and then the inhabitants demonstrate against the rising cost-of-living as the city falls.

LA Opera's sets were stark with a simple gray backdrop, neon signs, ceiling fans and other elements that were dropped in to create a colorful visual effect. The well-researched costuming by designer Ann Hould-Ward enabled the action to take place during eras of the Weimar Republic, 1950's Las Vegas and in the present. The purpose of these changes was supposed to make the audience aware of the relevance of the story today.

"Mahagonny," however, is about one particular city at one particular time with one set of characters. At first, I questioned whether or not the concept could work. After much thought, I have come to the conclusion that the time changes did. What was a little blurred, was the locales. Did the action begin in the Mojave Desert and then move to Las Vegas? We just weren't quite sure and, therefore, didn't understand the "Heil Hitler"

salute before intermission, even though we were aware that the Nazis had rioted and banned “Mahagonny” in the early 1930s.

But Mahagonny was a fictional city that was supposed to crumble at the end. It couldn't have been Las Vegas. It could have only been Las Vegas-esque. The city's disintegration by fire, as noted in most synopses of the opera, would have been an exciting visual finale; however, “Mahagonny” director John Doyle, set designer Mark Bailey and lighting designer Thomas C. Hase decided to forgo the vision. Las Vegas was a perfect parallel for Mahagonny: a gambling Sin City where money rules. I just believe that the production should have been more clearly set in the Las Vegas-esque locale.

THE ARTISTS

Since “Mahagonny” is both an opera and musical theater, the cast included performers from both genres. Audra McDonald was magnificent as Jenny Smith. Her low tones were earthy; her middle range, velvety; and her high tones were powerful and round. She had the required toughness of a prostitute while still retaining her likeability, and she looked stupendous in her flesh-colored lingerie. A consummate singer-actor with dance ability, it is no wonder that McDonald is the toast of musical theater today. But what sets her above the rest is that she is a classically-trained singer who studied at Juilliard. There is no break in her voice as she glides through the passaggio and floats from one register into the next, plus she has the technique to decide exactly how much chest she is going to use in her lower tones and how much she will apply to her middle register. Should she sound like Judy Garland or like a mezzo? She has the ability to make that decision, plus she thrills us when she sings up high. She knows how to create a balance of head and chest tone so that the flow is seamlessly continuous and supported. “When you're given a lot of choices in the middle area . . . how many sopranos die in their passaggio?” she told Opera News.

In “Mahagonny,” Patti LuPone as Leocadia Begbick is just such a victim, and unnecessarily so. A Tony Award winner for her performance in “Evita,” LuPone is known as a charismatic musical theater entertainer with a hefty voice. Although she also attended Juilliard, she never mastered the passaggio problem, although there is definitely head tone in her chesty lower tones, which should enable her to proceed upward. At intermission, a member of the press said to me: “She just can't sing.” That couldn't be farther from the truth. She “can” sing. She has a lush lower register and even has some surprising soprano tones. But she simply doesn't have the technique to create a balance of head and chest tone that results in an even flow of sound from the bottom of her register to the top.

“It [Begbick's music] is at the absolute top of my range and sits there all night long,” LuPone told Opera News. She said that she called LA Opera's music director James Conlon, and he told her that “there's a historical precedent in lowering the keys because it's what Lotte Lenya did.” (Lenya made the role of Jenny famous in Germany and later in the United States.) Yet knowing her own limitations, LuPone told Opera News that she hoped to sing the score in its original key. If she didn't have the technique, she should have transposed some of the numbers. Changes and cuts did occur. If she was unable to

find a solution, she shouldn't have accepted the role, although her acting was really delightful.

Another element of the production that is of major concern to me has to do with the Maidens of Mahagonny – the prostitutes. Three of the six are participants in the Domingo-Thornton Young Artist Program. I have heard them sing in their recent showcase, and each of them shows promise. Rena Harms and Natasha Flores have lush voices, and Karen Vuong is the recent winner of the CulturArte prize at Operalia 2006. These young artists are being trained for major international operatic careers, yet to gain experience, they have been directed to galloway scantily-dressed around the stage, vocally unnoticed. They are not competing to be Victoria's Secret models. Couldn't their talents have been put to better use? I have heard them. They have potentially great voices and shouldn't be placed in a situation where they are reduced to being reviewed as no more than poorly cast pinup girls. Some lesser singers with slim dancers' bodies would have been far better choices.

Anthony Dean Griffey was cast perfectly as Jimmy McIntyre who, by the way, is usually named Jimmy Mahoney. He is a capable lyric tenor with an easygoing gait that enabled him to create the needed chemistry between his character and Jenny.

Donnie Ray Albert's mellow speaking and singing voice as Trinity Moses awakened those in the audience who had come to hear opera. Other standouts were Steven Humes as Alaska Wolf Joe, Mel Ulrich as Bank Account Bill and Robert Wörle as Fatty the Bookkeeper. John Easterlin rounded out the cast as Jack O'Brien.

James Conlon conducted the orchestra with enthusiasm and urgency which kept the energy level high in the pit and onstage. Instruments including the zither and bandoneon added to the overall effect. The hurricane music was compelling.

Although the amplification was advantageous in this musical theater environment, the spoken narrations were loud and brassy, and the screen projections were out-of-focus.

This new production of "Mahagonny" has great value. The kinks could easily be worked through, and I hope the production returns, with some changes – but, once again, with the amazing Audra McDonald as Jenny.

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
Concertmaster, Stuart Canin
Chorus Master, William Vendice