



Scottish Arts Council

ARTISTIC EVALUATION – DRAMA

**Organisation/Venue:**

**Title of Event:** Bertolt Brecht's The Threepenny Opera, performed by Theatre Workshop at The Festival Theatre, Edinburgh

**Type of Event:** performance

**Date of Visit:** 03/07/04

**Overall Rating** (Please rate the production overall, taking into account your ratings for each section. Please state the key reasons for your overall ratings – i.e. the particular strengths and weaknesses.)

**Excellent** – Theatre Workshop set out, like Bertolt Brecht, to create a theatrical experience that would provoke the audience into seeing the world in a different way. With this highly professional, beautifully directed, acted and designed production, they have succeeded.

This rendering of The Threepenny Opera was at times laugh-out-loud funny, at other times heart-breakingly moving, and managed to make the audience face some devastating facts without being heavy handed or didactic.

A triumph.

**Name:** Judith Doherty

**Date:** 16.07.04

**Advisor**

**Scottish Arts Council Officer**

*Please tick the relevant title*

This report has been commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council to evaluate the artistic quality of the production named below. It has been prepared by either a specialist Advisor, or an officer of the Scottish Arts Council, as indicated at the end of the form. The report will be circulated to the organisation which produced the work and to the management of the venue, if the venue is core funded by the Scottish Arts Council.

The report may be made available to Scottish Arts Council Officers, Council and Committee members, and specialist advisors as appropriate. It will be taken into account in assessing the work of the producing company in relation to applications for funding to the Scottish Arts Council. It may also be used by the Council to report on the overall performance of its Core Funded organisations.

**Evaluators should enter their rating under each section, explaining briefly their reason for the rating with reference to their comments under each section. Ratings should be given in accordance with the following:**

**1-Very Poor** – standard falls well below what is acceptable.

**2-Poor** – not attaining acceptable standards of conception or presentation.

**3-Competent** – routine rather than especially interesting.

**4-Good** – well conceived and executed

**5-Excellent** – conceived and executed to a high standard.

## 1. Artistic Assessment

Please evaluate the artistic quality of the event, taking account of the following:

1.	Criteria	Rating	Comment and key reasons for rating
1.1	Vision and imagination	Excellent	<p>From the opening moments of Theatre Workshop's production of <i>The Threepenny Opera</i>, directed by Robert Rae, I was entranced. This is a production truly befitting a work that is often described as Brecht's masterpiece of music theatre. Rae uses the play to face us with the quite overwhelming question " why is it that of all the crimes against humanity committed by the Nazis it is still, to this day, only their crimes against the disabled that go unmarked and uncommemorated?"</p> <p>The glory of this rendering of the play is that, before we are presented with the full horror of this fact in the tremendously moving closing moments of the production, Rae and his cast and musicians, have taken us on a journey which has been at times funny and sexy, at times moving and shocking. We are treated to strong, sterling performances from a cast who aren't afraid to embrace their roles and attack the songs, an impressive set which combines sturdiness with delicate attention to detail and an extremely effective use of projection, and truly beautiful costumes. This was a very inspiring, and therefore surprisingly speedy, three and a half hours of high-quality theatre - one of those rare occasions where one is excited about returning to the auditorium after the interval.</p> <p>I left the theatre feeling that I been part of something special, with that flush of excitement that comes from watching very good live performance. I had been presented with some beautiful truths ("Love is the most important thing on Earth") and some frightening possibilities ("What keeps a man alive is hate and sin"). Ultimately I had been made to fully comprehend just how many disabled people had been murdered or sterilised during the Holocaust and how despicable it is that that this remains uncommemorated.</p> <p>On their website, Theatre Workshop states that it 'aims to produce theatre that is well crafted, moving, challenging, beautiful, accessible and honest. We believe that theatre has the potential to change the lived of the people who make it and the people who watch it'.</p> <p>With the startling production they have surpassed that aim.</p>

1.2	Clarity of Communication	Good	<p>There are some difficult songs and tracts of music in this show and at times the mic levels seemed a little low or the sound a little fuzzy. However, this was a shame rather than an annoyance and didn't detract from my enjoyment or understanding of the play.</p> <p>For the greater part the performers delivered their lines and speeches with great clarity and character, especially Sally Clay as Narrator, who led us through the plot with humour, drive, panache and skill – and excellent keyboard playing. While some singing voices were stronger than others the performers moved comfortably from speech to song and the narrative remained intelligible throughout.</p>
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## 2. Strengths and Weaknesses

*Assess the strengths and weaknesses of the event with reference to the following:*

2.	Criteria	Rating	Comment and key reasons for rating
2.1	Script – particularly in relation to new work or second productions	Excellent	<p>It is with good reason that this play is described as a masterpiece. It is a beautifully written, intelligent and fleshy script which is as vital, thought-provoking and entertaining now as it must have seemed when first performed in 1928.</p>
2.2	Direction	Excellent	<p>Director Robert Rae has achieved a production in which his inclusive company of professional and volunteer disabled and able-bodied cast, crew and musicians work seamlessly together to create a beautiful and arresting piece of theatre. Through his use of a multi-level set and trucked-on items of furniture (Peacham's imposing escriptoire-come-pulpit, Polly and Mac's bed, the brothel couches, the barred prison cell, the flown table laden with gleaming china and silverware) he achieves a sense of movement when it is needed and of beautiful tableaux when a scene demands stillness.</p> <p>The production has been directed at all times with sensitivity to the practical difficulties some of the performers have moving around the stage but one is never made to feel that this has hindered or dictated directorial choices.</p> <p>While there are times when, because of a performers disability, the action or the delivery of a speech is slower than it would be otherwise, neither the actor nor the audience feel uncomfortable with this. The scenes hold the attention and the production maintains its momentum throughout.</p> <p>The closing moments of the production are truly powerful and devastating. Following the feel good buoyancy of Macheath's last minute reprieve, we are</p>

			<p>faced with the stark reality of the Holocaust statistics projected above a stage full of people, many of whom would not have survived Hitler's policy. It was a brave and deft move that created a most extraordinary and almost overwhelming atmosphere in the theatre.</p>
2.3	<p>Standard of Performers – where performers are not trained, please reflect this in you comments</p>	Good	<p>There were outstanding performances from Garry Robson as Mr Peachum, Sally Clay as Narrator, Sarah Caltieri as Lucy, Ysabel Collyer as Jenny and Nabil Shaban as Macheath.</p> <p>On the whole this large cast worked very well together. The Community Volunteers were extremely effective, convincingly peopling the stage, sometimes as boisterous rabble, sometimes as silent, suffering beggars. They were fully integrated into the action and, while generally appearing as a crowd, managed to display individual character traits.</p> <p>It was very easy for the audience to stop seeing the actors as disabled performers begin appreciating them as a talented cast delivering very good work.</p>
2.4	<p>Use of Music<sup>1</sup></p>	Good	<p>Kurt Weill's score was performed brilliantly by a ten strong band of musicians under the leadership of musical director Tim O'Leary. Again, Sally Clay's performance was particularly outstanding and there was a tangible ripple of pleasure in the audience when she began the iconic 'Mac the Knife'.</p> <p>Other outstanding moments were The Barbara Song and The Moon Over Soho.</p> <p>Of the actors, the strongest and most arresting voice on the stage was Garry Robson (Mr Peachum) and there were beautiful, crystal performances from Sarah Caltieri (Lucy), Ysabel Collyer (Jenny) and Cerrie Burnell (Polly), although Cerrie seemed to struggle at times to hit her higher notes.</p> <p>Generally the rest of the cast had fine singing voices and the piece performed by the full company towards the end was very powerful. In the performance I saw, however, which admittedly was the closing night, some of the voices seemed a little tired or strained, in particular Pamela Ann Fry (Mrs Peachum). Pamela's performance was very strong and she seems to have a beautiful voice but it was difficult to hear her songs. This may have been to do with her mic, however.</p>

<sup>1</sup> In particular, please comment on the quality and appropriateness of any original music composed for the production. Please indicate whether the music was performed live or recorded, in whole or in parts, and what effect this has on the quality of the production.

			While the company had a Voice and Dialect Coach (Alex Gillon) there was no Singing Vocal Director listed in the programme credits. Employing a specialist singing director may have helped maintain the actors voices for the run.
2.5	Use of Movement/ Choreography	Good	<p>Movement Coach Tony Ellis and Director Robert Rae obviously worked very closely and well together as the movement of the actors around the stage was seamlessly intertwined with the overall direction of the piece.</p> <p>Two scenes in particular stood out, Jenny's (Ysabel Collyer) sexy and menacing tango and a gently titillating Polly (Cerrie Burnell) in her boudoir during the opening sequence.</p> <p>The crowd scenes worked very well and the smoothness of the bringing on and off of furniture suggests that possibly the Movement Coach had a hand in that also.</p>
2.6	Design <sup>2</sup> – including set, costume and lighting design	Excellent	<p>This production was performed in traverse, with the 350 strong audience in raked seating on the Festival Theatre stage, on either side of Set Designer Gordon Davidson's very clever set. It consisted of two raised truss and steel deck platforms at either end of the performance area. The band were placed at the top level at one end and very simple elements allowed us to imagine them in a velvety nightclub with a red light sign that folded down at the end of the show to announce the club's ironic name – The Happy End.</p> <p>On the corresponding platform we saw both Mrs Peacham's parlour and naughty-but-nice Polly's boudoir that, during the opening sequence of the performance held actress Cerrie Burnell in an scene reminiscent of a Degas painting. Beneath the platforms the structure framed pull down screens, charts and catwalks. Beautifully constructed pieces of furniture were trucked on and off. We were very easily transported to a street with protesting beggars, a stable being decked out for a wedding feast, a sumptuous brothel, Peacham's office or Macheath's prison cell.</p> <p>All was conceived with the actor's mobility in mind. The different levels and moving furniture meant that every scene was visually interesting.</p> <p>Christine Ross's costumes were particularly excellent, skilfully made and displaying an extremely pleasing attention to detail in accessories and personals.</p>

<sup>2</sup> Take into account how appropriate the design is in relation to the venue and, where appropriate, the touring schedule

			<p>Lighting Designer Dave Toneri's lights were atmospheric, working very well with the traverse performance. The use of projection was extremely impressive and the choice of footage worked brilliantly with the overall look adding greatly to the emotional impact of the piece.</p> <p>Unfortunately I did hear audience members complain during the intervals that they couldn't see some of the action. They were seated towards the back or sides and it's hard to say if this problem was peculiar to this venue.</p>
2.7	<p><b>Technical Standards</b> – was the production professionally presented from a technical point of view</p>	Excellent	<p>This production was very well presented technically. With live music, recorded sound, miked performers and projected footage Sound Designer/Technical Manager Phil Haldane was faced with a number of dreaded challenges, especially for a touring production, and coped admirably. He and his crew achieved what seemed, to the naked eye, to be a flawless show. The little fuzziness of the mics could be attributed to a number of different problems and didn't detract too much from the overall smoothness of the production.</p>
2.8	<p><b>Audience Response</b> – appropriateness of the production for the audience, estimate the size and reaction</p>	Excellent	<p>The audience response, once we had recovered from the heart-breaking closing sequence, was rapturous. With cheering and drumming of feet, the audience demanded the cast and musicians come back on stage for a curtain call and the atmosphere was nothing short of electric.</p> <p>This was a sold out performance (capacity of 350) and the audience comprised everyone from children to old-age pensioners. Their boisterous applause indicated that they were definitely an appropriate audience for the production. I heard from Front of House staff that they could have sold the shows at least twice over.</p>

### 3. Management of Event

*Please evaluate the way the event was presented/organised by the organisation and the venue, with reference to the checklist below, including additional comments/observations.*

3.	Criteria	Comments
3.1	<p>Suitability of the venue for the event</p>	<p>Performing in the Festival Theatre undoubtedly enabled Theatre Workshop to access an audience who may not otherwise have seen the work. It is fantastic that this brilliant production was seen by the widest possible audience.</p> <p>However, it did feel a little strange walking through the empty, very brightly lit auditorium to reach the 'studio' on stage and I would have preferred, if it were possible, to have come into the space from backstage.</p>

3.2	Information/ interpretive material at venue <sup>3</sup>	The production was accompanied by a very well, designed and informative programme and, while I was aware of a front of house display about the show, a large crowd in the bar area prevented me from getting close to it.
3.3	Publicity/ pre- publicity <sup>4</sup>	<p>Posters, flyers and programmes for the production were very well designed and of very high quality. The programme, in particular, was very informative. It may have been helpful if the printed material had pointed out that the audience would be seated on the stage and therefore numbers would be limited.</p> <p>As I was out of the country for the few weeks prior to attending the performance I hadn't read any previews or reviews of the work. On my return, however, I quickly became aware of very positive word of mouth.</p> <p>Theatre Workshop have a well designed, informative website that is easy to navigate.</p>
3.4	Ease of booking and payment	Having asked a colleague to book a ticket for me (because I was away) I fell foul of the Festival Theatre's policy of releasing reservations after five days. Generally however, it is very easy to book tickets for the Festival Theatre, either through the website or one of the other six ways of booking they boast.
3.5	External signage and signposting	Good
3.6	Internal directional signage	Good
3.7	Access and provision for disabled people	Good
3.8	Timing of the event – was the length appropriate? Did the start and finish time seem to be appropriate for the audience?	This production was a whopping three and a half hours long but the start time of 7.30pm, the inclusion of two intervals and the fact that it was extremely good made it seem very pacy and entirely appropriate for the audience.
3.9	Customer service - quality and efficiency of staff (e.g., box office, front of house and bar/catering)	The staff all seemed helpful, efficient and professional.

<sup>3</sup> These include programmes, displays etc., including the range, quality and clarity.

<sup>4</sup> Publicity/pre-publicity (leaflets, posters, etc), including the range, content, and when and where available. Be alert to the publicity available prior to your visit to the event. Also view and comment on the company's website where one is advertised, commenting on the ease of use, and quality of content and presentation, and currency of information

3.10	Acknowledgement of Scottish Arts Council funding <sup>5</sup>	The Scottish Arts Council logo was very clearly displayed on all publicity material and appears on the home page of Theatre Workshop's website. It was especially prominent in the programme with SAC having two pages explaining their commitment to working for arts and disability along with a quote from Jim Tough.
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<sup>5</sup> The following is an extract from the Scottish Arts Council's conditions of grant for funded organisations:  
"The company should acknowledge Scottish Arts Council funding in press releases, at launches, on all published materials (including leaflets, brochures, programmes, posters, notices display, exhibition materials, websites and advertising). Acknowledgement of the Scottish Arts Council grant must also be made in any secondary or indirect products arising from the revenue funding such as recordings, publications, video, broadcasts, computer programmes etc."  
Please comment on whether these conditions of grant were met, including use and prominence of the Scottish Arts Council logo on the company's website.