

**THE SCOTTISH ARTS COUNCIL**  
**ARTISTIC EVALUATION - DRAMA**

**Organisation/Venue:** Theatre Workshop at the Tramway  
**Title of Event:** The Threepenny Opera  
**Type of Event:** Performance  
**Date of Visit:** 17 June 2004

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 a Council Officer, as indicated at the end of the form. The report will be circulated to the organisation which produced the work, 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:**

**Very Poor** –standard falls well below what is acceptable

**Poor**- not attaining acceptable standards of conception or presentation

**Competent**– routine rather than especially interesting

**Good** –well conceived and executed.

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

**1. Artistic Assessment**

Please evaluate the **artistic quality** of the event

**1.1 Vision and Imagination.**

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating:
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good		
Excellent	<b>x</b>	

The conception of this production seems based on drawing out a link between the European political situation of 1928 and the issues surrounding the rights of disabled people and their position in contemporary society. The piece represents a world that was marginalised within the Weimar society of Germany in the late 1920s- the underworld of the beggars and petty criminals. By having all parts played by disabled actors the production sets up comparisons and connections between the social and political condition of disabled people now, and the mass murders of disabled people in Germany in the 1930s driven by theories of eugenics espoused by the Nazis. In the programme the Director interestingly raises issues to do with critical engagement with political theatre and the thesis that such engagement is made difficult, or indeed rendered impossible, by virtue of the would-be critic's implicit or explicit political position.

In my view the conception of this production proves the point that art which rises above mere propaganda-as this production does- is amenable to a complex and rewarding audience response, unlike its ersatz cousin, pure polemic.

Robert Rae quotes theatre critic Eric Bentley who argues that we embrace art that propagandises the viewpoint we espouse, and reject its antithesis. While this might have a commonsensical validity, it ignores the complexity of living art, and dangerously implies that political art is immune from critique unless the critic espouses the work's political stance. This is a Catch 22 argument that restricts the scope for critical engagement with political art to the adherents of its particular ideological stance.

The case of Threepenny Opera as a work, and this production in particular, I believe, specifically challenges Bentley's viewpoint. We are interested in this work not primarily because of its specific references to the social and political situation in Germany of 1928 (although that is

	<p>interesting in itself), but rather because of its relevance to the human condition. While Brecht clearly had political motives for creating this work, he was able to imbue it with a range of meanings that enable it to intrigue and engage audiences who may not be familiar with the historical details of his time.</p> <p>Dead art is simple and inert. Its meaning (usually singular) is easily read, easily rejected, and as easily forgotten. Living art is complex, and capable of changing and synthesising through time, under the gaze and understanding of an infinite number of viewers. It disturbs rather than irritates, and works on a variety of levels including the topical and political, but also going beyond the particularities of its epoch.</p> <p>We reject propaganda as bad art because its purpose is transparent and shallow. We engage with good art that resists superficial understanding but offers multi-layered interpretation. Its meanings will shift in the hands of different interpreters and under the gaze of different critics and times.</p> <p>One reason that the production of Threepenny Opera under discussion is a success is that the work itself has the structural integrity to carry Robert Rae's re-interpretation of its themes. If the piece was mere propaganda it would collapse under the weight of any alternative interpretation. It is testimony to its robustness as a work of art that it is open to a range of readings while preserving its identity and integrity.</p> <p>To attempt to re-interpret work that is mere propaganda is to destroy it, as its only justification for existence is to convince the viewer of the truth of its point of view, and possibly to prompt the viewer to action as a result. So it is not surprising that Bentley characterises the rejection of propaganda as a function of the viewer's political position. The audience member has no alternative but to reject propaganda that is not congenial to his or her beliefs, since there is nothing else to engage with in the work.</p> <p>The production team is to be congratulated in re-proving the power of Brecht's vision as an artist as well as his skill as a polemicist.</p>
--	---

**1.2 Clarity of Communication.**

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating: The performances were generally clear and the dialogue easily understood. The song lyrics were less easy to follow and this seemed to be a result of technical difficulties. The use of the narrator and the projection of scene titles also helped the communication.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good	<b>x</b>	
Excellent		

You are also asked to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the event with specific reference to the following:

**1.3 Script** (particularly in relation to new work, or second productions).

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating: I am not very familiar with this text, but I understand that the prologue and epilogue (including projected text) was devised by the company and director. Part of the prologue was spoken in German thus emphasising the thematic allusions to that country during the emergence of Nazism and the events that this foreshadowed. The prologue also made references to political events in Germany at or around the time the play was premiered. This was an effective way of raising pertinent issues that fed into the overall conception of the production. I found the text accessible and convincing, but would not feel competent to comment on its merit in comparison to other translations, although I thought it appropriate that a version by MacDiarmid was used, given his status and political provenance.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good		
Excellent	<b>x</b>	

**1.4 Direction**

<b>Rating for this section</b> <i>(Please tick)</i>		<b>Comments and key reasons for rating:</b> The production was presented in a traverse stage configuration with two equal banks of raked seating facing each other. The band was set on a raised platform at one end of the traverse, opposite a raised gantry and rostra. There were two large projection screens behind each bank of seating, to be viewed from the opposite seating area. Entrances were made from either end of the traverse area with some on to the overhead gantry. This configuration gave rise to some masking of the action by other actors, and the relatively narrow playing area sometimes felt cramped. I am not sure what the advantages of this configuration to the production were, aside from perhaps bringing the audience closer to the action. The projections were of period (early twentieth century) documentary film footage depicting scenes relevant to the action. These served to underscore the meaning of the scenes on stage. The film excerpts' style and quality were consistent and therefore effective. The conception of the piece was concerned with perceptions and preconceptions of physicality and it mined Brecht's themes of sexuality and sexual exploitation (as well as the natural enjoyment of sensual pleasure). Within the context of a disabled company these themes were not without political overtones, and the production was not afraid to face up to such issues. There were several scenes of partial female nudity which were in danger of verging on the voyeuristic, and handled with varying degrees of sensitivity and panache.  The main strength of the direction was the set piece ensemble scenes which were well managed and effective. The overall conception was strong and sat well with the presentation. Due to the staging, all props and furniture had to be moved on and off and this did tend to interrupt the free flow at times. The pace of the production was slow at times, with spoken lines waiting on business being carried out, thus slowing things down. I thought that the presentation of the songs was unnecessarily formalised with the singers-particularly Cerrie Burnell as Polly- giving more of a recital than a music-theatre performance. She was set on a rostrum and directed her voice and gaze diagonally to the audience, thus removing the possibility of eye contact and greater engagement of the audience. I think a more moved performance of the songs with more audience awareness would have helped the performer in
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good	<b>x</b>	
Excellent		

		this situation.
--	--	-----------------

**1.5 Standard of performers- where performers are not trained, please reflect this in your comments.**

Rating for this section (Please tick)		Comments and key reasons for rating:
Very Poor		This varied considerably. Setting aside the community performers, the standard of performer ranged from excellent to competent. Gary Robson stood out as Peachum, as did Nabil Shaban as Macheath , both central male characters being portrayed with gusto and élan. Cerrie Burnell as Polly was very effective, if a little “reppy” at times. Pamela Ann Fry did not reflect the high standards set by her peers in the main parts. Sally Clay was an excellent narrator and she was backed by an excellent band with some wonderful wind playing by John Sampson. Performances in the minor parts was generally acceptable, but uneven. The chorus was well managed and disciplined. The singing was of a high standard, but hampered by inconsistent amplification.
Poor		
Competent		
Good	<b>x</b>	
Excellent		

**1.6 Use of music – 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 part, and what effect this had on the quality of the production.**

Rating for this section (Please tick)		Comments and key reasons for rating:
Very Poor		As mentioned above, the band was first rate and most of the singing very good. All the music was live and a real sense of a live music theatre event was created.
Poor		
Competent		
Good		
Excellent	<b>x</b>	

**1.7 Use of Movement or Choreography**

Rating for this section (Please tick)		Comments and key reasons for rating: There was no choreography as such.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good		
Excellent		

**1.8 Design** – including set, costume and lighting design. Please take into account how appropriate the design is in relation to the venue, and, where appropriate, the touring schedule.

Rating for this section (Please tick)		Comments and key reasons for rating: The design included large fabric hangings loosely hung round the performance space, masking the walls. These were decorated by abstract shapes in various colours, thus creating defined theatrical space. The gantries and rostra supported the band and some acting spaces. There were sightline issues-mainly relating to the band who were only partially visible from the front row, and the narrator was hardly visible at all from that position. The costumes were pretty convincing as being from the 1920s period. An exception was the police commissioner's uniform which looked more like a poorly adapted contemporary uniform. The costumes of the chorus did not seem to relate to the period, having more in common with early 19 <sup>th</sup> rather than 20 <sup>th</sup> century to my eye. However, overall the production was well dressed. The lighting was adequate but did not really seem to enhance the production in any significant way, being rather dull in some scenes and raw in others. The use of the George Grosz painting as an image for the poster and programme worked very well with the themes of the production, and its use as a banner in the show itself was also effective.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good	<b>X</b>	
Excellent		

**1.9 Technical Standards** – please comment on whether the production was professionally presented from a technical point of view.

Rating for this section (Please tick)		Comments and key reasons for rating: The apparent problems with radio mikes was referred to above. Either not all the singers had mikes or they were not all working, or only worked intermittently. Whatever the cause, the effect was inconsistent sound levels on voices with some songs very difficult to follow, while others were fine. There were a few glitches with entrances and some sticky entrances which took away from the overall slickness of the production. There was an unfortunate transference of moustache make-up from MacHeath to Polly following their kiss which left Polly with a blackened face-probably visible only from the closer rows.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent	<b>x</b>	
Good		
Excellent		

**1.10 Overall production** – was the production successful overall in relation to any stated aims (e.g. in the programme or other printed material, and stated aims and objectives)

Rating for this section (Please tick)		Comments and key reasons for rating: An ambitious undertaking with a clear conception and some excellent performances in the acting, singing and instrumental performance. I believe that the choice of this play was well-judged as a vehicle for an aesthetic expression of issues relating to disability and political rights and the historical and potential threats to those rights. The production bravely threw up challenging issues to do with sexuality and how the mainstream conceives of what is acceptable in sexual behaviour or its portrayal. On the whole it handled this with sensitivity, but the threat of gratuitousness was never far off. Assembling such a large cast and achieving a consistent level of performing ability was always going to be a challenge and the excellence of the leading players did carry the production and eclipse some of the weaker moments. The technical presentation will no doubt improve over the run (this was the first night) and I have no doubt that it will become a tighter more coherent show. It is too long at 3 and a half hour and needs to be tightened up or cut.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good	<b>x</b>	
Excellent		

**1.11 Was the performance appropriate for the audience?**

Yes- a mixed age group with a number of visibly disabled people. I was very good to see Theatre Workshop's work in a different setting with new faces in the audience benefiting from the work and the ideas behind it. There was a different and healthy dynamic which indicated the benefit of taking the company's work out to wider audiences.

**1.12 Estimated size of audience and reaction to the production.**

Virtually a full house with an attentive audience that reacted positively at the end. There was not as much reaction to the humour of the piece as I would have expected.

**2. Management of Event**

Please evaluate the way the event was presented/organised by the organisation and by the venue. Please answer, where relevant, with reference to the checklist below adding any other comments/observations you may have.

**2.1 Was the venue suitable for the event?**

Yes- it has the capability of flexible configuration and the production took advantage of this.

I found the front of house staff helpful and pleasant.

**2.2 Information/Interpretive material provided at the venue (e.g. programmes, displays etc)**

- range, quantity and clarity.

The programme was well produced and had interesting and relevant information. It is always useful to have photographs of the acts as well as biogs, especially when there is a large cast

In the programme the Director, Robert Rae offers a debate on the issue of the amenability of political theatre (or art with political content or intent) to criticism by viewers who may not share the artist's political viewpoint. He quotes theatre critic Eric Bentley who argues that we embrace art that propagandises the viewpoint we espouse and reject its antithesis. While this might have a commonsensical validity, it ignores the complexity of living art, and dangerously implies that political art is immune from critique unless the critic espouses the work's political stance. This is a Catch 22 argument that narrows the scope for critical engagement with political art to the adherents of its particular ideological stance.

The case of Threepenny Opera as a work, and this production in particular, I believe specifically challenges Bentley's viewpoint. We are interested in this work not primarily because of its specific references to the social and political situation in Germany of 1928 (although that is interesting in itself), but rather because of its relevance to the human condition. While Brecht clearly had political motives for creating this work, he was able to imbue it with a range of meanings that enable it to intrigue and engage audiences who may not be familiar with the historical details of his time.

Dead art is simple and inert. Its meaning (usually singular) is easily read and as easily forgotten. Living art is complex, and capable of changing and synthesising through time, under the gaze and understanding of an infinite number of viewers. We reject propaganda as bad art because its purpose is transparent and shallow. We engage with good art that resists superficial understanding but offers multi-layered interpretation. Its meanings will shift in the hands of different interpreters and under the scrutiny of different critics.

One reason that the production of Threepenny Opera under discussion is a success is that the work itself has the structural integrity to carry Robert Rae's re-interpretation of its themes. If the piece was mere propaganda it would collapse under the weight of any alternative interpretation. It is testimony to its robustness as a work of art that it is open to a range of readings while preserving its identity and integrity.

To attempt to re-interpret work that does not rise above the level of propaganda, would be to destroy it, as its only justification for existence is to convince the viewer of the truth of its point of view, and possibly to prompt the viewer to action as a result. So it is not surprising that Bentley characterises the rejection of propaganda as a function of the viewer's political position. The audience member has no alternative but to reject propaganda that is not congenial to his or her beliefs, since there is nothing else to engage with in the work.

### **2.3 Publicity/Pre-Publicity for the Event (leaflets, posters, etc)**

- range, content and when and where available. Please be alert to the publicity available prior to your visit to the event. Please also view and comment on the company's website where one is advertised. Comment on the ease of use, and quality of content and presentation, and currency of information.  
Extensive press previews and features.

### **2.4 Accessibility of the venue**

- ease of payment-Good
- location-good
- external signposting -fair
- internal directional signing-good
- access and provision for disabled people-as far as I am aware-good
- timing of event- The show was around 10 minutes late going up, and as noted above was excessively long.

**2.5 Customer service**

- quality and efficiency of staff (e.g. box office, front of house, bar and/or catering).

Good

**3. Acknowledgement of Scottish Arts Council Funding** (if applicable)

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 and 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, and computer programmes etc. “*

Please comment on whether the above conditions of grant were met, including use and prominence of the Scottish Arts Council logo on the company's website.

Good acknowledgement on posters leaflets and programme.

**Name: David Taylor**

**Date: 21 June 2004**

**Advisor**  **Scottish Arts Council Officer**  **X**  
(Please tick above as appropriate)