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Brave new world still keeps you on a knife-edge ;
The Threepenny Opera Donmar Warehouse

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SIXTY-SIX years after its Berlin premiere, Phyllida Lloyd's bold new production shows Brecht's Threepenny Opera still has the sting of uncomfortable truth. And the jazzy sound of Kurt Weill's music proves to be forever young, obstinately modern. After the saccharine and sentimentality of the contemporary musical, it is high relief to be whisked away to a world where life is nasty, brutish and real.

Miss Lloyd's production arrives parading its novelty value. As Brecht plundered and adapted John Gay's Beggar's Opera, drawing it from London 1728 to late 19th-century Soho, so Miss Lloyd has updated her Threepenny Opera to 2001. When poor Polly Peachum (Sharon Small), daughter of the beggar's leader, marries the arch gangster MacHeath, King William is about to be crowned. And 50,000 surveillance cameras are on duty, ensuring no foul play interferes with the monarch's coronation glory.

In theory all this updating seems fair play - and fun. The Threepenny Opera is, after all, a satirical anti-opera, borrowing from operetta and Kipling's ballads. But instead of the low-life original, with its beggars, tarts and villains, none of whom comes to a really bad end, Miss Lloyd opts for a brave new world of super-technology.

Vicki Mortimer's stage is festooned with video screens showing a painfully implausible female commentator bringing news from coronation crowds. Tom Mannion's Mr Peachum, the beggars' leader with his lap-top computer, control of 14 begging zones and instant identi-kit photographs, oozes luxury. And MacHeath - despite the police chief, a three-faced Simon Dormandy, who hankers gaily for him - ends up facing public death by electrocution, video cameras at the ready.

This satirical pointing is ponderously comic. There's not that strong sense of a rackets, villainous society where MacHeath cannot control his sexual itch and vengeful, lovelorn whores achieve his undoing in more ways than one. But Jeremy Sams's new lyrics prove a sharp, witty and comic triumph of updating. The song for squaddies - all dressed in Union Jacks - culminates in disturbingly familiar chauvinism: "We'll help the foreigner, to meet the coroner." WHAT'S more, Mr Sams, far more than Miss Lloyd, emphasises the stringent Brechtian sense of a tough, crooked world where, true to Mrs Thatcher's warning, there's

no such thing as society. Here "you have to kill your neighbour to survive". The Flick-Knife Song has a real, dangerous edge. And Tara Hugo's black-garbed temptress, Jenny, giving the one starry performance of the night, sings of love gone by in glorious voice. She expresses both a revulsion for this violent, corrupt society and her sense of being trapped by it. Gary Yershon's direction of his small musical troupe, some playing instruments and acting, yields beautiful dividends. Tom Hollander's MacHeath, a long-haired blond, putting on a throaty nasal sneer of a voice, lacks the air of a charismatic, dangerous villain, and never sounds like one. Beverley Klein's Mrs Peachum disconcertingly talks cockney and sings middle-class. Yet, despite the production's heavy-handed gimmickry, and the beggars rather overlooked, this Threepenny Opera is a serious delight.