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THEATRE / The Threepenny Opera, or whatever that is in Ecus; The Threepenny Opera Donmar Warehouse, London

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It's 2001 and there are licensed beggars on the London streets through which, in a matter of days, the gilded coach bearing young Prince William to his coronation will majestically sweep. Between our time and then, the British army has seen active service in Hong Kong, the death penalty has been re-introduced and the trials and executions are, it seems, conducted by tacky game show-style television. But not everything in the garden is unlovely. Why, the hacks on the Evening Standard are exactly the same bunch as at present. Which, to discerning readers, will be an inexpressible consolation.

We know there's been no change staff-wise because a future-shock 2001 edition of the paper (worth every fraction of its 0.5 Ecus) is available to people who attend Phyllida Lloyd's updated reworking of **The Threepenny Opera** at the Donmar Warehouse in London.

Having already transplanted Gay's Beggar's Opera from the 18th century to a mock-Victorian Soho, Bertolt Brecht was not averse to directors relocating his own version elsewhere, provided it helped the show make the same point.

He suggested to Giorgio Strehler, for example, the idea of transposing the proceedings to the Italian quarter of New York around 1900. The ethos of crime, and the sentimental, self-deluded attachment to the home values these immigrants had carried over from Italy (American whore houses thought of as "like being back at mamma's"), was exactly right for a piece based on the perception that criminals are essentially bourgeois in their values and that, by reverse logic, the bourgeoisie are therefore criminals.

The Donmar reworking presents the story of Macheath as a spoof Crimewatch 2000 reconstruction, images of our hero hobnobbing with the likes of Leslie Grantham or as recorded by surveillance cameras et cetera flashed up on the television monitors that surround the centre acting area.

With the face of a satanically staring angel, diminutive **Tom Hollander** plays Macheath as a psychotic South London charmer, his voice a loud spivvy quack that spells nerd-with-knife. It's certainly a compelling performance, but while the Brechtian balance between righteous "respectability" and actual nefariousness is still struck with the Peachums (Tom Mannion and Beverley Klein, who here capitalise on human misery by offering, for a cut, training sessions and all types of disguise to folk who want to pose as beggars), the same cannot be said of the conception in this version of Macheath and youthful gang. Instead of petit bourgeois snobbery and violence, it's in-yer-face yobbery and violence that this lot trade in, which inflicts grievous bodily harm on Brecht's point. Yet, though I wasn't convinced by the show, I did enjoy quite a lot of it. True, the actors perform Weill's wonderfully incisive songs in a messy mish-mash of styles, from the off-putting pop delivery of Sharon Small's Polly to the stunningly apt glucose-and-vinegar curdle in the voice of Tara Hugo's whore, Jenny, whose rendition of "Mac the Knife" mounts in exhilarating mordancy verse by verse to bring the first half to a knockout close. Much, indeed, has been got right, including Gary Yershon's musical direction and the energy charge that is given to the piece by the electronic imagery.

The best reason for going, though, is to hear Jeremy Sams's biting, topically tilted lyrics which deftly pack in a wealth of modern reference, from Goose Green to Torvill and Dean. Some, I believe, are an improvement on the original.

Instead of ending with the famous cannibal image of "Beefsteak tartare", the verses of "The Squaddies' Song" here have a contemptuously casual understatedness which manages to chill the blood even more: "White, or black, or khaki / A darkie's still a da r kie. / You'll notice from the bodies / Where the squaddies have been."

Only once, in the song proclaiming Brecht's "Grub before Essex" principle, does Sams miss a trick. His version goes: "First give us breakfast / Then we'll start the day": why not, "First give us breakfast / then Thought for the day"?

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