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Theatre check

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THE THREEPENNY OPERA  
Donmar Warehouse  
NEW OPENING

Phyllida Lloyd has pulled out all the stops for her new production of Weill and Brecht's 1928 parody opera. The setting is England in 2001. William V is about to be crowned; his father, Charles, Duke of Windsor, will, we are told, be watching the event on television. As the story unfolds, we get a running commentary and cunning close-ups on a row of television monitors suspended above the acting area. This could easily be just a tired, fashionable device, but Lloyd uses it to strong narrative and satirical effect.

The acting is mostly sharp and nifty. Tom Hollander plays a deeply sinister Macheath: a playful, baby-faced operator with a smugly evil gaze and the swift, sleek reactions of a predatory otter. In prison he soon wangles himself top-quality sheets and satin cushions, with obliging warders providing fine food, drugs and massage precisely the kind of regime for which the director of the Prison Service would get a hefty performance bonus.

This is a stylish, biting, witty and athletic production and yet it left me totally cold. What can poor old Brecht, even in an updated form, say to an unshockable age? Compared to the original Beggar's Opera, this is mere entertainment: Gay's opera really upset people and was one of the causes of political stage censorship being brought in by the Walpole government. By contrast, even in the Weimar republic, The Threepenny Opera was only a harmless tickle in the ribs of a sophisticated metropolitan audience, titillating their smug sense of political and erotic corruption. Since then, the world has grown up and is none the better for it.

Still, don't let me put you off this sizzling, cheerfully nasty production. Its star is Tara Hugo, an actress new to me, who plays Jenny with a sense of bruised but pugnacious sexuality and sings with a sense of pain, thrill and haunting sensual anguish.