

Wendy Knox's 'Threepenny Opera' isn't small change

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American audiences have historically been pampered by their musical theater, a genre that generally hasn't required much rumination to digest either in terms of plot or music. Frank Theatre's current staging of "The Threepenny Opera," then, is going to give the traditionalists a case of indigestion: This is a play that requires attention and work in order to uncover its rewards.

There's little in the way of cheery tunes chopped up neatly into eight-bar packages or cobbled into soaring anthems. Composer Kurt Weill's score veers in a different direction with its dark, bawdy music-hall feel. The lyrics of even the most jaunty tunes (as translated and adapted by American Marc Blitzstein) talk of murder and mayhem.

The story? Bertolt Brecht concocted a merry little tale about class warfare centering on a certain cutthroat name MacHeath, his assorted lovers and various hoodlums, whores and crooked policemen.

All of this is tied up in cerebral fashion by director Wendy Knox, who decided a story like this needed to be interpreted in the high, artificial realm of melodrama -- bitten nails, huge facial expressions, exaggerated body poses, the works. The effect is probably just what Brecht's theory of Epic Theatre might have wanted -- we don't see actors playing roles so much as actors wearing their characters like masks -- but the



Steve Hendrickson sneers as MacHeath

broad styling might be disquieting for audiences reared on naturalistic acting.

Still, it works, especially in a couple of masterful performances by Steve Hendrickson and Heidi Fellner. Hendrickson, resplendent in a mustard-yellow jacket and blood-red spats, plays MacHeath as one big oily, postured sneer; his voice a high, hissy buzz that sounds like the helium has begun to wear off. As his most recent bride, Polly Peachum, Fellner wears her hair in sausage curls but demonstrates that beneath the little-bad-girl frou-frou lies a selfish woman who is very scary indeed.

Fellner also is blessed with one of a number of lovely soprano voices in the cast (including those of Ruth Mackenzie and Janis Hardy) that make the score vibrate with life.

Accompanied by a lone piano in the relatively cozy Southern Theatre, it's possible to hear all these terrific voices without amplification, a sumptuous and almost unheard-of treat in these days of wireless body microphones.

There are a couple of downsides to Knox's high-blown style. Her scenes are so densely packed with images that there are times when it feels like sensory overload: We're so busy watching her crafty use of the actors that we sometimes lose track of Brecht's themes of alienation and hypocrisy.

Too, when someone does not or cannot fall in with the melodrama, they tend to stick out. Such is the case with Molly Sue McDonald, whose Lucy Brown is too outsized for a regular musical but not of the proper scale for this production.

Frank Theatre's "Threepenny" is far from a perfect production, and, weighing in at a full and largely dour three hours, it's probably not everyone's cup of tea. Director and actors seem to be reaching for an aesthetic synergy that seems in their hands one moment and tantalizingly beyond their grasp the next. But it's difficult not to wonder at the courage and the daring it took them all to reach so high.

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