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'Threepenny Opera' travels uneasily through time

UDM tries to connect show to present-day headlines

BY JOHN MONAGHAN • FREE PRESS SPECIAL WRITER • MARCH 26, 2009

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When Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill unleashed "The Threepenny Opera" on Berlin in 1928, they made a bold statement about capitalism and corruption, and it was one that extended way beyond time lines and national borders.

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The new production staged by the University of Detroit Mercy's Theatre Company continues in this vein. Though the dialogue and lyrics still reference Queen Victoria's 1837 coronation, the set and costumes hint at Detroit in the years since the 1967 riots.

There is a lot to admire in this production, which is filled with ambition and pluck even when it comes up inadequate in the vocal and acting departments.

The show opens with the familiar strains of "Mack the Knife," the tune that became a 1959 hit for Bobby Darin. It introduces main character Macheath (Sam Brice), a charming rascal whose underworld exploits are so noteworthy that his imprisonment and possible hanging threaten to overshadow the coronation.

The uneven cast in this production is highlighted by UDM professor and Equity member Greg Trzaskoma as crime boss J.J. Peachum, whose daughter Polly (Catherine Dacpano Menzies) becomes Mack's wife. The problem is that Mack is already married to Lucy (Anne Di Iorio), who wrangles with her rival in the second-act "Jealousy Duet."

The second half of the show holds the best moments, starting with Shirley Hayden's "Ballad of Sexual Dependency." If her voice sounds familiar, it's because her blues belting has backed everyone from Kid Rock to the Red Hot Chili Peppers in live and recorded performances.

Though I liked some of the costuming choices, especially the "Shaft"-era duds of Mack's minions, the crazy quilt of styles is ultimately off-putting. The prostitutes, for instance, look as if they could be from Weimar Berlin or a Depression-era sporting house. And whose idea was it to make the opening "Mack the Knife" street singer look like a stoner refugee from "Hair"?

The boldest move here is the way veteran director Arthur Beer uses projected images to make connections between the play and modern-day avarice and lapses in justice. The audience sees images of everyone from former Tyco CEO Dennis Kozlowski to disgraced financier Bernard Madoff



Catherine Dacpano Menzies as Polly Peachum in "The Threepenny Opera."

(Greg Grobis)

'THE THREEPENNY OPERA'

out of four stars

8 p.m. Fri.-Sat.,

2 p.m. Sun.

Through April 5

The Theatre Company

University of Detroit Mercy

Marygrove College campus

8425 W.

McNichols,

Detroit

313-993-3270

\$20, \$16 seniors,

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set against pictures of Americans who are down and out.

The most striking comparison comes when Kwame Kilpatrick appears on the screen. You quickly realize just how much lead actor Brice resembles the former Detroit mayor in both size and defiant demeanor as his character juggles at least three women while trying to bluster his way out of prison.

The printed line that accompanies his image, "You done set me up for a comeback," becomes a perfect metaphor for the show's still-bitter view of a world where criminal misconduct leads to six-figure salaries while much of the population starves.

Contact freelance writer **JOHN MONAGHAN** at madjohn@earthlink.net.

In your voice

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