



[The Threepenny Opera](#)

at The Octagon Theatre, Bolton

Reviewed by [Matthew Dougall](#) October 2017

Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's seminal collaboration, based on John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, about the seedy underworld character Mack The Knife's downfall,

The Threepenny Opera

, was given a very modern up-to-the-minute political twist this evening by director,

David Thacker

for Bolton Octagon's new production of it.

The Octagon Theatre isn't really known for work that pushes the boundaries, and their normal

mainstream fayre usually sits comfortably in the middle class family bracket; however Brecht can never be said to be this; a boundary-pusher and political activist who used his theatre teachings and productions to break boundaries and incite change within a stymied tradition.

It is quite surprising then to find this in their season, and massive kudos to The Octagon for tackling it. Thacker's directing however was sadly rather predictable and simply wasn't challenging enough. The whole production was very 'neat' and 'clean' and nowhere near edgy and gritty enough. I really liked the idea of bringing the production from 1920s Berlin to post-modern post-Brexit London with Boris Johnson as PM and the imminent coronation of King Charles III, however, there are certain underlying themes within the piece - such as the treatment of women - which didn't quite work so well in this time period.

The story tells of Macheath, an underworld overlord who is wanted for crimes including rape and murder, known to and feared by all, and yet remains uncaught by the police due to his long-standing friendship with the chief of police, Tiger Brown. That is, until he decides to marry the daughter of another crime boss, Peachum, who between him and his wife, and their contacts, bring about his downfall and capture. It's a play about political corruption with a strong message, as relevant to the now as it was even in its 17th century guise.

David Birrell was our protagonist, and commanded the stage with his powerful baritone voice, but I didn't find him either dangerous or oozing manly sexuality enough to be truly believable. A more stolid character came in the form of **Eric Potts** playing *Mr. Peachum*. I really enjoyed his 'Fagin-wrapped-inside-Mr-Bumble' interpretation of the role and his singing was superb. I simply didn't understand why he and others had local northern accents when majority of the cast were either Southern or RP and the play was set in London.

In total opposition to the naturalistic styles of both Birrell and Potts, we saw **Sue Devaney** ham it up for all it was worth with a caricature performance of Mrs. Potts. I have to admit to disliking this immensely at first, but the more I saw the more I bought into it, and indeed probably a more Brechtian characterisation than feigned realism. In fact her rendition of The Sexual Imperative Song was the best I have thus far heard.

I think the one thing that impressed me more than anything this evening was the music. Using Weill's original and rather unusual scoring (apparently the Weill estate won't let you change even a single note!), the producers had to find a cast who could not only act and sing their hearts out but also play a varying array of musical instruments, some of which are not normally associated with the Actor-musician. In this regard they did a sterling job. The music, under the direction of **Carol Sloman** - who also played the role of Lottie - was perfect.

The production as a whole though was rather Curate's Eggish. When it was good it was very good, but the production as a whole had too many mixed messages and inconsistencies to truly engage and excite. That's a real shame, because it had the potential to be truly thrilling, but somehow stopped short. As one audience member was overheard saying, 'It was Brecht watered down'.