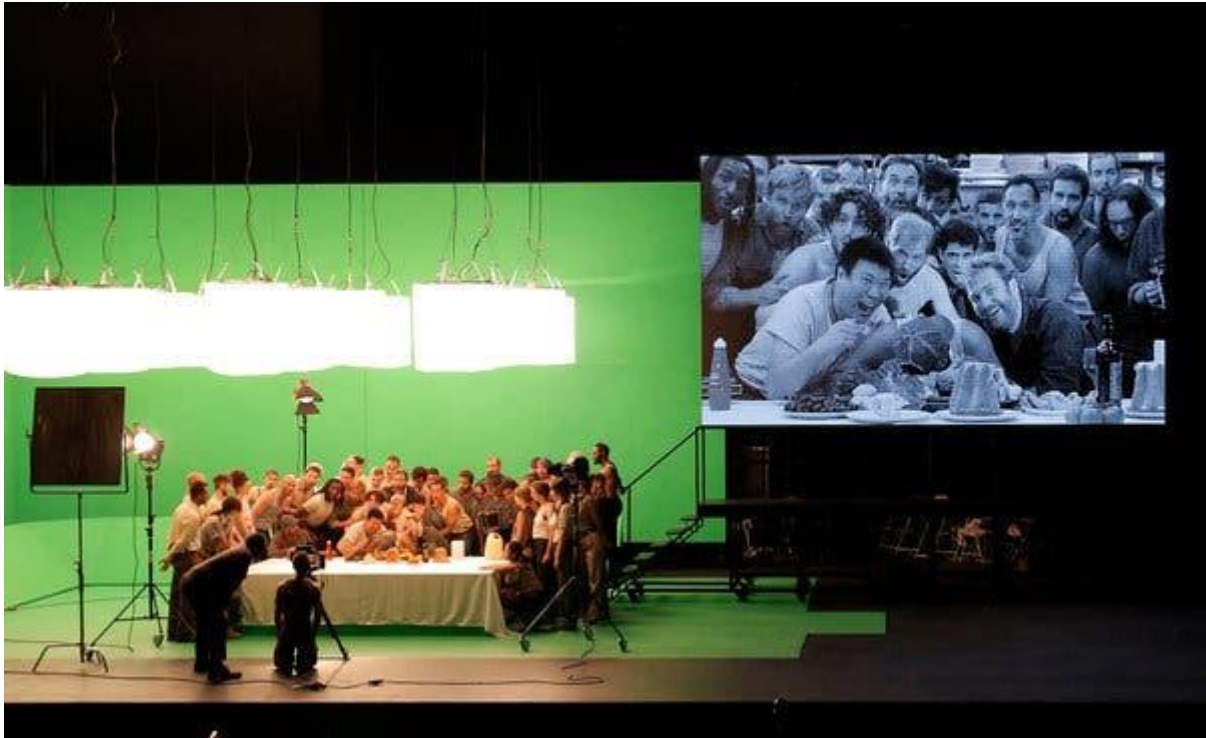


# Review: Ivo van Hove's 'Mahagonny' Does Justice to Brecht and Weill

A new production will travel from the Aix Festival in France to the Metropolitan Opera.



Ivo van Hove's production of "Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny" at the Aix Festival makes extensive use of live camera footage. Credit Pascal Victor

AIX-EN-PROVENCE, France — Is it possible to have a good time at "Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny," Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's fiercely cynical opera about the destructive power of the almighty dollar?

It certainly is difficult: As the bodies pile up — death by uninhibited pleasure, or by the simple inability to pay a bar tab — sympathy is hard to come by. So are happy endings.

And yet Ivo van Hove's new staging of "Mahagonny" — a Metropolitan Opera-bound production that [premiered at the Aix Festival here](#) on Saturday evening — is, quite simply, enjoyable.

Not because of the brutal story, of course. No, much of the joy of this "Mahagonny" comes from witnessing two masters at work: Mr. van Hove, whose concept is both true to his style and in tune with Brecht's intentions, and Esa-Pekka Salonen, whose conducting of Weill's score may be the finest I've heard, especially as played by the reliably impressive [Philharmonia Orchestra](#).

"Mahagonny" (1930) is the peak of Weill and Brecht's tumultuous, influential six-year partnership, which also gave birth to works like "The Threepenny Opera" and "The Seven

Deadly Sins.” Its form paves the way for Brecht’s trademark “epic theater,” with an episodic plot that progresses with unsettling nonchalance. The score, even more ambitiously than in “Threepenny,” marries Weill’s classical craftsmanship with the popular sounds and instruments of Weimar-era Berlin.

But “Mahagonny” is often misunderstood. Many directors lean too heavily into the darkness of Brecht’s libretto, reducing the characters to savagery and violence. (I once saw a production that involved eating ash from urns and a singer performing while holding a fake erection.) Conductors tend to miss the dancing energy of Weill’s deceptively straightforward music.



From left, Alan Oke, Karita Mattila and Willard White as Mahagonny’s founders. Credit Pascal Victor

Mr. van Hove, while not offering a particularly revelatory read of the opera, at least understands it, and illustrates it clearly. His staging may have the appearance of avant-garde theater: live video and harsh lighting, designed, along with the set, by Mr. van Hove’s frequent collaborator Jan Versweyveld. But it is actually quite tame and direct.

As in many of Mr. van Hove’s productions, including the recently closed [“Network”](#) on Broadway, multimedia is his primary storytelling tool. Here, unlike in some of his stagings, his characteristic style couldn’t be a better fit.

His use of video — a camera crew follows the cast around, sometimes showing action in the wings that couldn’t otherwise be seen by the audience — is a reflection of our contemporary lives, with historic moments and meaningless minutiae filmed and shared in real time. In the language of Brechtian theater, it’s also a modern tool of alienation, a reminder that the

audience shouldn't lose itself in the narrative, and that the world "Mahagonny" satirizes is very much our own 21st-century reality.

The video screen is also where Mr. van Hove presents the titles of each scene, matter-of-fact phrases like "The city of Mahagonny is founded" and "The execution of Jimmy Mahoney." These were an indispensable feature of Weill and Brecht's original production, designed by Caspar Neher; they are sometimes excluded by directors today, but I don't see how the opera fully functions without them.

But Mr. van Hove isn't overly faithful, either. Among his interventions is the treatment of the female characters, here more empowered than ever — especially Begbick, one of the founders of Mahagonny (the soprano Karita Mattila, towering in both musicality and sheer presence), and the prostitutes, led by a charismatic yet chilly Annette Dasch as Jenny Hill. And Mr. van Hove sets the opera in a film studio, not to make it a backstage drama, but to suggest that Mahagonny is a fantasy or mirage, always too good to be true.

The production opens with the stage nearly empty, with only a scaffold holding up the video screen. From there, Mahagonny is built from the ground up, with dressing room mirrors, craft services, and, eventually, enormous green screens. Begbick — and her two scummy colleagues, Fatty (Alan Oke) and Moses (Willard White) — establish the city as, she says, a "spider web" that attracts the working-class masses, including four lumberjacks from Alaska.

One of them, Jimmy Mahoney (the tenor Nikolai Schukoff, persuasively anguished in his big Act III aria, "Wenn der Himmel hell wird"), falls for the prostitute Jenny, their first love scene here rendered onscreen as a grainy black-and-white melodrama out of old Hollywood. But he's also unhappy in Mahagonny, and, after a crisis of faith and the threat of a hurricane, leads the people of the city to a new way of life: one based on absolute freedom, and absolute pleasure.



The destruction of Mahagonny in the opera's final scene. Credit Pascal Victor

Once Jimmy's Mahagonny — governed by the right to eat, make love, fight and drink — takes wing, so does Mr. van Hove's production. Those green screens are put to brilliant use, with each vice played out against a virtual backdrop. Jimmy's friend Jack O'Brien (Sean Panikkar, a sweet, bright tenor gone too soon from the plot) dies while overeating in what seems to be a busy chef's kitchen; later, men take turns miming sex in front of an empty wall that, onscreen, shows a woman on her knees thrusting with them. Another friend, Joe (Peixin Chen), dies in a boxing match against someone in a green suit that appears invisible in the resulting footage.

If Mahagonny is an illusion, Mr. van Hove argues, then so are the pleasures of its people. The chef's kitchen, the prostitute and the powerful boxer are all special effects, empty experiences.

Which is to say, none of it is built to last: The moment Jimmy can't pay for his whiskey, he is put on trial and sentenced to death. With his execution comes riots, and the downfall of Mahagonny. The protesters, not coincidentally, are angry about the same things you might hear about on the streets of France every week in "Yellow Vests" demonstrations.

It can be difficult to hear amid the chaos, but Weill's music for this explosive finale is a funeral march. That couldn't have been clearer in Mr. Salonen's interpretation, which throughout the performance was intelligently alert to Weill's dance-inspired rhythms — and energetic, with a fleetness to match the pace of epic theater. His conducting is reason alone to see this "Mahagonny."

When the opera travels to the Met in New York, it's a given that Mr. van Hove will be there. But it should be essential that Mr. Salonen joins him.

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