



## We'll have a Gay old time

How to stage John Gay's darkly satirical *Beggar's Opera*? **Igor Toronyi-Lalic** on two new solutions

A starry crowd — Swift, Pope, Hogarth and Robert Walpole, the Prime Minister — all turned out for the 1728 premiere of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*. It was lucky. Gay's first stage piece had been a total flop.

But *The Beggar's Opera* outperformed every other stage work that century. The lead actress, Lavinia Fenton, became a prototype pin-up. John Rich, the producer, became so wealthy that he built a new theatre — the precursor to the Royal Opera House. And the

author, John Gay, a bit of a dead loss up until that time, was taken up by high society.

The topsy-turvy tale of the Newgate ne'er-do-wells Polly Peachum, Lucy Lockit and Macheath has since seeped into our collective consciousness and secured itself a place in the theatrical canon. Yet doing the work justice is not easy. The difficulty is that no one quite knows how it went. The Gay text exists but there is no authentic score except for the basic tunes.

So each time it's performed it has to be refashioned. Which

is potentially tricky. Go pseudo-Baroque, like Sir Malcolm Sargent, and you could lose some of the freshness. Chuck the original songs, like Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht in *The Threepenny Opera*, and you could lose some of the work. Do you aerate or thicken? Go lowbrow or highbrow? Pop or opera?

Next week two attempts to resolve the work go head to head: an operatic realisation by Benjamin Britten at the Linbury Studio in Covent Garden and a musical adaptation by the playwright Stephen Jef-

freys and director Max Stafford-Clark with the Out of Joint theatre company that shoves the original Gay ballads and arias next to modern pop tunes.

For Stafford-Clark, the only way to release the potency of the original was to reinvest the work with the spirit of the original form: the ballad opera. "In borrowing tunes from Ian Dury, Carly Simon, the Pogues and the Gypsy Punks, we're simply following the path John Gay laid out," he explains.

The ballad opera, a theatrical innovation that Gay had a large hand in developing, jammed modern street songs up against filched bits of popular opera and repartee. It was fast, sharp and vivid, with the actors intermittently breaking into song — essentially the world's first musical — and it must have sounded as fresh as a daisy. Stafford-Clark, being true to the spirit and not the word — though he is true to most of the words, too — moves proceedings from New-

gate prison to a convicts' ship and offers an all-singing, all-playing cast of dissenters.

"Their first group song is *I Wanna Be Straight* by Ian Dury," explains Stafford-Clark, "and that's really a Cockney patter song. So we've kept the tradition and changed the lyrics." There are also Gay tunes as well as Handel and Purcell.

The 1948 Britten adaptation being revived at Covent Garden, on the other hand, keeps the melodies exactly as they are but with significant rehar-

monisation, adding a layer of commentary that makes it sound a lot like, er, Britten. The conductor Christian Curnyn, a Baroque specialist who is standing in for the late Richard Hickox, thinks this is no bad thing. "I love the Baroque and the original is very charming. But what Britten does improves it," he says. "He brings in a whole new level of emotion." It is a typically dark take on the world from Britten that emphasises the strangeness and toughness of the songs.

Both productions are united by their engagement with the work's nihilistic satire. *The Beggar's Opera* knocked over every convention and moral certitude. It also provoked the Archbishop of Canterbury to fulminate against its immorality. So Stafford-Clark introduces

the horrors of a convict's journey and Way presents a dystopia, "a warning piece". "Instead of an heroic opera that is going to teach you how to be more heroic, here are people that will teach you how to screw each other even better, Prime Minister — who, at the premiere, cleverly encored some of the wittier gags aimed at him to show what a good sport he was — to enact a bill of censorship that stopped Gay's next work, *Polly*, from getting staged.

**"It's kitsch and it's kind of ugly; it's also a love song to London"**

how to pursue your self-interest with more finesse," Way says. "The satire is absolutely directed at the people sitting out front."

Neither production is overtly political, however; the satire, according to both, is clear enough. It also may be foolish to try to emulate the political stink that the original set off in lampooning Walpole. It led the

biggest challenge for both productions was to get the tone right. Stafford-Clark says: "On the one hand, it's a musical romp; on the other, it's a gritty depiction of low-level life. Finding a balance between the two, between the difficulty and unpleasantness and having a great evening in the theatre, is the contradiction you have to resolve. But you've got to get

*The Convict's Opera* modern pop with

the comic elements of the reality. Macheath and a charmer."

Way thinks the production does at its core what the original makes the work: a kind of satire and a kind of song to London. "It's a song to London and a city's sh\*\*\*yness. How you can both spise something and love it at the same time. Or how you can hate it because you hate it." *The Beggar's Opera* at the Studio, ROH, London, Jan 20-27 (020-7609 0207). *The Convict's Opera* at the S. Playhouse, then t. (www.outofjoint.co.uk) 020-7609 0207.