



out of joint

# *The Convict's Opera: A workpack*

*Compiled by Maeve McKeown*



## *Aim of Workpack*

The resource materials in this pack are intended to enhance students' enjoyment and understanding of *The Convict's Opera*. The activities present creative and practical strategies for learning in a classroom setting. The resources are primarily aimed at students aged 16+ who are studying Drama at BTEC or A Level.

The workpack is in four sections – *The Beggar's Opera*, Historical Context of *The Convict's Opera*, Making *The Convict's Opera* and Rehearsals. We hope you find the materials interesting and relevant for your studies.



Costume design by Tess Schofield

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## *Introduction by the Director*

Curiously enough the idea of resetting *The Beggar's Opera* onboard a convict transport ship sailing to Australia came not from any desire to update the script but was simply a pragmatic response to the fact that Out of Joint was embarking on a co-production with the Sydney Theatre Company and half the cast would be Australian. It seemed a natural extension of the situation we were in to re-set it from Newgate prison to a convict transport. It certainly led to a great deal of research being undertaken by the cast themselves and certainly that's the course I would advocate for any future company of the play. Such subjects as Methodism, Luddites, Captain Swing, causes for the decline of the highwayman, the law and homosexuality, the Enclosures Act, 18<sup>th</sup> century politics and 18<sup>th</sup> century medicine occupied the actors' leisure hours. Gradually we accumulated a knowledge of and increasing interest in this fascinating period. Everything that exists in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is obviously per-Marxist yet there are various strong libertarian movements. It is pre-feminist yet Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, the mother of feminism, was writing at this time and it was pre-Freudian and yet there was no absence of sex.



There is only one instance of a successful mutiny on a convict transport yet the threat of rebellion and whispered plans for mutiny were a constant presence for every Transport Captain. From about 1800 onwards Captains understood the necessity of keeping the convicts both exercised and diverted and plays, sing-songs, dancing, mock trials and even the publication of ships' newspapers were permitted. A curious ambivalence is that the presence of ships' surgeons meant for example that pregnant women received a higher level of medical attention that they would ever have been able to attain on the mainland.

Robert Hughes tells us that plays were rehearsed and performed on board. There is no specific record of a production of *The Beggar's Opera*, but as easily the most popular play of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and with music the convicts would certainly have been familiar with, it is at least a possibility that Polly, Lucy and Macheath entertained a convict audience.

Max Stafford-Clark, Jan 2009

# *The Beggar's Opera*



## John Gay and *The Beggar's Opera*

Baptized at Barnstaple, Devon, on September 16, 1685, during the reign of Charles II, John Gay was orphaned by the age of ten but raised by a kind uncle, who saw to his education at the local grammar school. Before writing *The Beggar's Opera*, John Gay was already a well-known writer of ballads. He was also very familiar with Italian opera, and wrote the libretto to Handel's opera *Acis and Galatea* in 1719. Ironically, he was to directly satirize this opera tradition and its conventions in *The Beggar's Opera*.



Initially, *The Beggar's Opera* was rejected by the famous Drury Lane Theatre in London. When the manager of Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre, John Rich, agreed to produce it, he was taking a big chance on a form of theatre that had never been performed before. It was a gamble that paid off, and the massive popularity of *The Beggar's Opera* enabled Rich to build Covent Garden, today the most famous opera house in London.

The first performance, on January 29 1728, apparently began with some concern on the part of the audience as they realised how much it would depart from the conventions of the day. But the sparkling dialogue, witty satire, and ingenious ballads set to well-loved familiar tunes guaranteed a success. Alexander Pope reported:

*We were all at the first night of it, in great uncertainty of the event; till we were very much encouraged by overhearing the Duke of Argyle, who sat in the box next to us, say, "it will do,--it must do!--I see it in the eyes of them."--This was a good while before the first act was over, and so gave us ease soon; for the duke, (besides his own good taste) has a more particular knack than anyone now living, in discovering the taste of the public. He was quite right in this, as usual; the good nature of the audience appeared stronger and stronger with every act, and ended in a clamour of applause (Anecdotes 159; in Schultz, 3).*

The success proved overwhelming. The London weekly *The Craftsman*, on February 3, carried a short notice:

*This Week a Dramatick Entertainment has been exhibited at the Theatre in Lincoln's-Inn-Fields, entitled the Beggar's Opera, which has met with a very general Applause, insomuch that the Waggs say it hath made Rich very Gay, and probably will make Gay very Rich.*

*The Beggar's Opera* ran for an unprecedented sixty two performances that year, all to full houses. The play was staged in a number of other cities in England, and while the original London run was still in progress spread to Wales and Ireland, and was the first musical comedy produced in New York City. *The Beggar's Opera* was printed (and pirated) in many editions; the songs were sung everywhere, and prints of Miss Fenton as Polly were sold in all the shops. The actress was mobbed wherever she went, and eventually married a lord, the Duke of Bolton, who had been present on opening night and lost his heart upon first hearing her sing "Oh ponder well! Be not severe."

Gay made over six hundred pounds from *The Beggar's Opera* – a huge amount of money at the time. However, he wasn't very good with money and never had another success like *The Beggar's Opera*, so he frequently had to rely on his friends to help him out. He died in London in 1732, at forty-seven years of age. His remains were interred in the Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey, and marked with an inscription which included these lines:



## *The Beggar's Opera – Political Context and Adaptations*

When John Gay wrote to his friend Jonathan Swift that he was planning to write what he called a “Newgate pastoral” (named after the notorious London prison), he could have had no idea that he was about to produce the largest box-office hit of the entire eighteenth century.

First produced in 1728, *The Beggar's Opera* proved an immediate success and was frequently revived, through to the present day. It also created a new theatrical genre, the ballad opera, that has much in common with the modern stage musical. The music that Gay used was not original, though his lyrics largely were. He borrowed from contemporary operas but above all from popular ballads already known to his audience, such as the song “Over the Hills and Far Away” which is performed in *The Beggar's Opera* by Macheath and Polly Peachum as a love duet. Following this tradition, Out of Joint's production of *The Convict's Opera* ‘borrows’ the modern equivalent of these well-known songs, such as pop classics “You're So Vain” and “500 Miles”.



Many of the themes of *The Beggar's Opera* are strongly relevant to the politics of the time in which it was written, and still have resonance today. In 1728, Robert Walpole had become Great Britain's first “Prime Minister” and for the first time an organised legal opposition was allowed both inside and outside Parliament.

The origins of the modern political party system were established, and opposition to the ruling government was no longer automatically seen as treason.

From the outset Gay's opera was rightly seen as an attack on the Prime Minister and his government. *The Beggar's Opera* sets Peachum (the criminal gang-leader) and Lockit (the prison turnkey) against Macheath and his gang of highwaymen. In *The Beggar's Opera*, Peachum, Lockit and Walpole represent a new world of capitalism and corruption, with their world-view well summed up by Peachum's “Every one preys upon his neighbour, and yet we herd together”. Meanwhile, Macheath and his gang see themselves as a kind of latter-day Robin Hoods: “we are for a just partition of the world, for every man hath a right to enjoy life”.

In addition, the characters in Gay's play exist in society's underbelly, and are therefore not controlled or limited by conventional morality – in many ways, this is mirrored in the convicts who were transported to Australia, where the harsh new country and life on ship meant that new rules and moral codes had to apply. This helps to create an exciting freedom for modern directors and writers who have adapted *The Beggar's Opera*. A version of *The Beggar's Opera* in 2002 set it in modern South Africa, with carnivals and lines spoken in Zulu, and the National Theatre presented *The Villain's Opera* in 2000, an adaptation set in contemporary London among drug barons, corrupt politicians and gangland hoods. The themes of *The Beggar's Opera* – love, money, betrayal, political corruption – are universal, and capable of being applied to almost any set of social and political circumstances. It is because of this that *The Beggar's Opera* has proved so popular all around the world for constant revival and adaptation.

***Thanks to John Bull, Professor of Film and Theatre at the University of Reading (UK) and author of amongst other books, a work on the post-Restoration playwrights Vanbrugh and Farquhar.***

## Adaptations of *The Beggar's Opera*

1728 *The Beggar's Opera* is written by John Gay, using the tunes of 69 well-known ballads and opera melodies. A huge success, it runs for an unprecedented sixty two performances in its first season.

1728 Thomas Cooke and John Mottley's ballad opera *Penelope* is the first work to imitate the style of *The Beggar's Opera*, with well-known ballads and dramatic scenes. Opening in May 1728 in London, it is a version of Homer's *Odyssey* set in England – but can't match the success of *The Beggar's Opera* and runs for only three nights.

1777 *Polly*, John Gay's sequel to *The Beggar's Opera*, receives its first public performance in London, nearly fifty years after it was written in 1728. Banned for half a century because of its satirical treatment of the Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole, it follows a similar form to *The Beggar's Opera*, with seventy-one songs. In it, Macheath is transported to the West Indies. Polly Peachum disguises herself as a young man to pursue Macheath who is now married to Jenny Diver who betrayed him in *The Beggar's Opera*. It is rarely performed.

1928 *The Threepenny Opera*.



Bertolt Brecht (words) and Kurt Weill (music) create a popular new musical adaptation of the work entitled *The Threepenny Opera* (or *Die*

*Dreigroschenoper*). It is reasonably faithful to the original plot (although set in the nineteenth century) but the music is newly composed.

1948 Benjamin Britten creates a new adaptation of *The Beggar's Opera* with new harmonisations and re-arrangements of existing tunes.

1975 Czech playwright Václav Havel creates a non-musical adaptation of *The Beggar's Opera*. Havel later served as President of the Czech Republic from 1993 – 2003.

1998 The all female Japanese troupe, Takarazuka Revue, produces *Speakeasy* (or *The Pure-Hearted Crooks of Chicago, the Windy City*) – a play based on *The Beggar's Opera*.



2000 *The Villain's Opera* at the National Theatre in London gives *The Beggar's Opera* a contemporary London updating. It is written by Nick Dear with music by Stephen Warbeck.

2008 Sydney Theatre Company and Out of Joint co-produce *The Convict's Opera*, written by Stephen Jeffreys and directed by Max Stafford-Clark. It is set aboard a convict ship bound for Australia, where convicts are putting on a version of *The Beggar's Opera*.

# Historical Context of The Convict's Opera

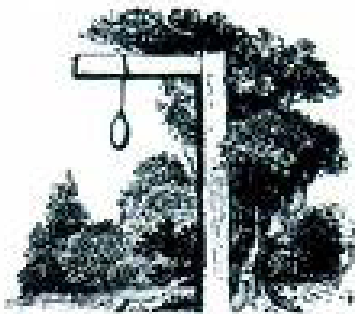


## *Transportation and Punishment*

The Georgian judicial system was one of the harshest in Europe, leading to hugely overcrowded prisons. From 1751 to 1800 over 1400 people were hanged publicly in London. Watkin Tench argues that public hanging was the working peoples' "favourite form of entertainment", and Tyburn gallows was the central attraction. The "public" was more interested in hanging people for crimes against property (e.g. theft) rather than the self (e.g. murder).

### Hangable Offences

MURDER  
ATTEMPTED MURDER  
RAPE  
SODOMY  
ARSON  
BURGLARY  
ROBBERY  
ANIMAL THEFT  
WOUNDING CATTLE  
COINING  
FORGERY  
PERJURY



Many of the convicts transported to Australia had originally been sentenced to death, but were given a 'conditional pardon' and their sentences commuted to transportation.

Children were treated as harshly as adults; in 1814 five children under the age of fourteen were hanged at the Old Bailey, the youngest being only eight years old.

Young women were often transported rather than hanged in order to cater to the sexual desires of male prisoners, officers on board convict ships and in the Australian colonies.

The oldest convict to be transported was Dorothy Handland, an 82 year old 'old clothes woman', convicted of perjury. She was the first suicide in Australia.

**"The idea behind transportation came from a view that there was a criminal section of society and once you put them all on boats and sent them to a far off place then there wouldn't be." Stephen Jeffreys**



The following was a popular song in London at the time of transportation:

Let us drink a good health to our schemers above,  
Who at length have contrived from this land to remove,  
Thieves, robbers and villains, they'll send 'em away,  
To become a new people at Botany Bay.

Some men say they have talents and trades to get bread,  
Yet they sponge on mankind to be clothed and fed,  
They'll spend all they get and turn night into day,  
Now I'll have all suck sots sent to Botany Bay.

There's whores, pimps and bastards, a large costly crew,  
Maintained by the sweat of a labouring few,  
They should have no commission, place, pension or pay,  
Such locusts should all go to Botany Bay...<sup>1</sup>



#### Questions

1. Could transportation happen today?
2. Could transportation be a solution to overcrowded prisons?
3. Do you think an 'underclass' exists in Britain today?
4. Compare the attitudes in this eighteenth century song to attitudes towards those living in poverty in Britain today; how do they compare?

<sup>1</sup> Judith Cook, *To Brave Every Danger: The Epic Life of Mary Bryant of Fowey*, Truran Books Ltd: London, 1999, pp.74

## EXERCISE: THE TRANSPORTATION GAME

Get into small groups. Each group creates a communal character and their biography. Your character legitimately earns £20 a year. To survive you need £40 a year. You therefore are likely to be forced to commit crimes to cover this shortfall.

One person (possibly a teacher) is the dealer and deals each group three cards. Look at your cards. These cards will indicate the criminal activity you have to undertake for survival. A low card could be stealing a loaf of bread, a high card, say nine, could be grand theft and coining. Choose your crimes to fit your cards and characters. Kings and Queens are trump cards. A King symbolises a 'King's Pardon' - if caught you can use this to be reprieved. (A local vicar or a person of high standing has given you a character reference). A Queen means you are pregnant (male characters can swap or sell this card). If caught you can use this card to change your sentence from transportation into imprisonment or from hanging to transportation.

Decide which crime you are going to commit and place the corresponding card in the centre. Each group takes it in turn to relate the story of their crime.

After each story has been told, the Dealer turns over a card from the remaining pack. If it is the same suit or the same number you have been caught and will be hanged or transported for your crime (the Dealer acts as judge and decides the sentence). If it is not the same you have got away with it and have earned the sum of the card. Obviously the higher the card you choose to gamble, the sooner you will reach your £40 a year.

SEE WHO SURVIVES AND GOOD LUCK!

## Life onboard a Convict Ship

Between 1787 and 1868, 825 convict ships were sent to Australia carrying 164,000 prisoners with an average of 200 per ship. Ships were infested with rats, lice, cockroaches and fleas. The food was basic, lacking in greens, and water was extremely scarce. The ships were not custom built for transporting people, and berths were packed below deck. John Boyle O'Reilly, an Irish political prisoner wrote of life in the hold:

*"The air was stifling...There was no draught through the barred hatches. The sun above them was blazing hot. The pitch dropped from the seams, and burnt their flesh as it fell. There was only one word spoken or thought – one yearning idea in every mind – water... Two pints of water a day were served out to each convict – a quart of putrid and blood-warm liquid. It was a woeful sight to see the thirsty souls devour this allowance."*

The First and Second Fleets were notorious for their cruelty, inhumanity and suffering. Convicts were kept in irons which prevented them from moving without breaking their legs and were lashed for the smallest misdemeanour, sometimes until death. Robert Hughes writes, "The starving prisoners lay chilled to the bone on soaked bedding, unexercised, crusted with salt, shit and vomit, festering with scurvy and boils."<sup>2</sup> Out of 499 prisoners sent on one of the ships in the Second Fleet, only 72 arrived in fair health.



### EXERCISE

Mark out an area 2 metres by 1.5 on the floor. Fill with eight people. Have "guards" or marines patrolling the space. Anyone standing upright, speaking to the wrong person, general disobedience or any other personal reasons can be extracted by the marines to await a sentence of flogging (possible death). How would this feel for nearly eight months? Imagine the smell, disease, lack of privacy etc.

1 Robert Hughes, The Fatal Shore, (Vintage: London, 2007), pp.152

2 Hughes, The Fatal Shore, pp. 145

After the horror of the Second Fleet, some changes were made to the transportation system. Transportation was contracted out to private companies and the government now put checks in place, such as deferring 25% of payment per convict until they arrived in Australia in good health. In 1814, Dr William Redfern, a convict himself and the 'father of Australian medicine' wrote a report on the ships' conditions. He stressed the need for "ventilation, swabbing, clean hands, disinfection with lime and 'oil of tar', fumigation and exercise,"<sup>3</sup> and the necessity for a surgeon aboard every ship. His suggestions were put into effect and dramatically changed transportation; while it was still an unimaginable voyage, the death rate fell to 1 in 122 and the surgeon was often an ally for the convicts.



Prisoners entertained themselves in a variety of ways. Robert Hughes writes:

*"They danced and (when in irons) managed a clinking beat with their chains... They gambled for anything from tobacco to clothes, and if no one had cards they would dismember Bibles and prayer-books to make them, as a clergyman found to his distress on a transport in 1819. Sometimes they staged amateur plays, or held mock trials on deck – cathartic parodies in which the "judge", robed in a patchwork quilt with a swab combed over his head for a wig, his face made up with red-lead, chalk and stove-backing, would volley denunciations at the cowering "prisoner."<sup>4</sup>*

The most important ceremony onboard for the convicts was 'Crossing the Line', a ritual which makes an appearance in *The Convict's Opera* and still occurs in the Navy today. 'Neptune' would appear onboard the ship and initiate all those who had never crossed the equator before:

*"Fearsome in swab-wig and iron trident, shells and dried starfish entangled in his oakum beard, sewn into the flayed skin of a dolphin and stinking to heaven under the vertical sun, the sea-god would bear down on the neophytes flanked by grinning jack-tar "mermaids" holding buckets of soap and gunk. The initiates were clipped with scissors and lathered with a mop, "shaved" and then ducked in a tub of seawater."<sup>5</sup>*

Sometimes it was a brutal event involving beating "pollywogs" with boards and wet ropes and sometimes throwing the victims over the side of the ship. Sailors were reported to have been killed while participating in a crossing the line ceremony.

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3 Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, pp.151

4 Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, pp.154

5 Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, pp.154

## Sydney

“One hot afternoon in the January of 1788, with big white birds screeching from the trees by the shore, a captain of the Royal Navy had sailed into that body of water and chosen a cove with a stream of fresh water and a fingernail of beach. He had stepped out of the boat and caused the Union Jack to be hoisted on a spar leaning crookedly upright, and declared this place part of the extended territories of King George III, Sovereign of Great Britain, Defender of the Faith. Now it was called Sydney Cove, and it had only one purpose: to be a container for those condemned by His Majesty’s courts.

On the September morning that the *Alexander* dropped its anchor in Sydney Cove, it took William Thornhill sometime to see what was around him. The felons were brought up on deck but, after so long in the darkness of the hold, the light pouring out of the sky was like being struck in the face. Sharp points of brilliance winked up from water that glittered hard and bright. He squinted between his fingers, felt tears run hot down his face, blinked them away. For a moment he glimpsed things clear: the body of shining water on which the *Alexander* had come to rest, the folds of the land around, woolly with forest, blunt paws of it pushing out into the water. Near at hand a few blocky golden buildings lined the shore, their windows a glare of gold. They swam and blurred through spears of light.”

From *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville

“The place which had been chosen for this far-off commonwealth and prison, and named Sydney Cove in the spirit of events, faced the sun, which here was always in the North. This reminded you, if you thought about it, that home was always on the other side of the sun – eight moons of navigation away if you were lucky, a year or more if not. The land on either side of the



AN INDICIOUS GEOGRAPHICAL CARTOON.

“Stick and White.”

cove was divided down the middle by a fresh water stream flowing out of a low hinterland among cabbage-tree palms, native cedars, the strange, obdurate eucalyptus trees of a type which (as Ralph was assured by scholars like Davy), occurred no where else in all creation.”

From *The Playmaker* by Thomas Keneally

“Everything they had been told about it, even the testimony of Cook’s log, was wrong. They had expected grassland with deep black soil and well spaced trees, where crops could be planted without clearing; an ample source of building stone; a protected anchorage.

But what Captain Phillip saw from the deck as his ship

rounded point Solander and halled into Botany Bay on January 18th 1788 was a flat heath of paperbark scrub and grey-green eucalypts, stretching featurelessly away under the grinding white light of that Australian summer. The dry buzzing monotony of the landscape did not match Cook’s account. The bay was open and unprotected, and the Pacific rollers gave it a violent, persistent swell; the water was shallow, and the holding ground poor.”

From *The Fatal Shore* by Robert Hughes

### Exercise

Choose one of the three extracts above about convicts arriving in Australia. In groups, discuss and explore practically how you could adapt your chosen passage into a scene. Perform your scene for the class.

# Making The Convict's Opera



## Interview with Stephen Jeffreys

OJO: Where did the idea come from to adapt *The Beggar's Opera*?

SJ: From Max. It was after his stroke and he couldn't read and he couldn't do very much except think. So it was Max being a powerhouse of ideas by default of not being able to do anything else.

OJO: Was it difficult to compress two plays into one?

SJ: *The Beggar's Opera* is not a hugely long play but it's a full-length evening anyway. Then to have ten characters and you've got to show what their crime is, how they relate to being on the boat as convicts, how they relate to one another as an acting company and how they relate to arriving in Australia - it's a bit like trying to pour two pints of soup into a one pint tin. So there's a certain amount of cutting corners, certain ideas which I didn't follow up and certain ideas that I did follow up that have been cut. Bett Rock is a confidence trickster and we see her in Western Australia performing a clever confidence trick, getting the female convicts when they land in a Catholic country to pretend to be Catholic penitents and get money out of people that way. Unfortunately we're not going to see that in this country because it makes it a little bit too long. So there are certain ideas that you will just see the residue of what might have been rather than what was.



OJO: Was that frustrating as a writer?

SJ: I quite enjoyed writing under those circumstances. I can normally time plays quite accurately but in plays with music it becomes much harder because you just don't know how long it will last. Especially when we've put in a lot of new songs. It requires a bit more radically cutting back on the original. But it was an interesting thing to try to do.

OJO: What other challenges were there in writing a musical as opposed to a straight play?

SJ: I love writing song lyrics. I never get the chance, it's one of the things nobody ever asks me to do and I think I'm quite good at it. I did enjoy it. Particularly with writing new lyrics to existing songs; lots of those songs I've been singing myself for years. I think you have a lot more licence in a musical somehow because songs pop up out of nowhere. You can make quite cheesy links that you wouldn't normally make. In a purely verbal play you have to be quite careful about how you move from one line to another. In a musical it's kind of understood that you're going to stop the action and someone's going to have a song. I think the question about writing musicals is simply how you use the songs, what function the songs have. In *The Beggar's Opera* a lot of the songs don't seem to have a dramatic function. So in a way, as the first musical allegedly, it probably confused people who were trying to write musicals for years after, because it breaks a lot of what became rules for musicals.

OJO: How do you think your version adds to the original?

SJ: The original is rather odd in that it has quite a romantic view of criminals; it's a literary device, the idea that these criminals would stop sinning and make these comments. It had quite a cynical view of human nature

but I think its view of the criminals is rather pleasant. The idea of putting on real convicts doing it is to try to give a bit more edge to it. Having said that, you have to imagine it with criminals who are literate enough and committed enough to want to do a play; so they're not exactly the total dregs of society. In the accounts of a lot of the convicts' ships you can't imagine them being able to do what they do in this play. That's one of the reasons why we set the play slightly later - it's not one of the first convicts' ships to go to Australia, well it was never a picnic, but then conditions had improved slightly. Using modern songs updates it a little bit. I think we have so much fiction about crime at the moment, a bit too much actually, police dramas like 'The Wire', there's kind of an adulation about criminal communities and I'm not trying to write about that at all. I would say that using a device like *The Convict's Opera* is quite interesting because it resets crime stories in a way that isn't about accounts of undercover police trying to expose drug deals. Because it is a literary device it gives you a slightly different view on crime. And what it also puts together, which isn't a particularly original idea, is that politicians and criminals are in a similar vein, operate in the same way. It just gives a bit of a different perspective than you might see in a TV version of crime. It changes the way in which it is handled.

OJO: But some convicts weren't really criminals were they?

SJ: Well yes, the idea behind transportation came from a view that there was a criminal section of society and once you put them all on boats and sent them to a far off place then there wouldn't be. But it ignores the fact that at the time of transportation there was a huge increase in the population and the economy couldn't sustain that number of people, so in order to survive you had to live a life of crime. Bear in mind, in our society although obviously there are disadvantaged people, it is a much more affluent society than in the eighteenth/early nineteenth century. The poverty was just incredible. A lot of people were sent to Australia for what would now be seen as very trivial crimes, such as stealing very small quantities of food. The number of people who were allegedly political criminals has been exaggerated, that was another solution, another way of getting rid of people.

OJO: How much research did you do to write the play?

SJ: I'd done a certain amount of research already. I was in Australia last year and I took the opportunity while I was there to read about the original settlers, the first fleet and the second fleet. There was an exhibition in Sydney while I was there particularly about the first two or three fleets. So I did quite a lot while I was there and I researched a certain amount about the slang; I thought some of Gay's language might be unfamiliar to the audience so I made the text that I'd written relatively easy to understand. I worked a lot on the view of crime in the eighteenth century, the kind of people who were on the convicts' ships and the kind of things that went on there. I had to ignore a lot of that because the given of the play is that conditions would be good enough for convicts to mount a play, it's slightly unreal so I think I've made the conditions aboard the ship seem slightly easier than they really were. I was interested in the individual criminals as well. The counterfeiter has a long speech to the audience telling them how to counterfeit coins, which is quite interesting.

OJO: If John Gay were alive now what would you ask him?

SJ: I would ask him if he's happy about his reputation, about the way he's been treated. I think other writers who have had less of his talent have been more celebrated. He was hugely lucky with *The Beggar's Opera* but after that it didn't go so well for him. I think I might ask him how serious he was and I expect that he would reply that he wasn't being that serious at all. The thing about *The Beggar's Opera* was it was one of those ideas that was absolutely right and he was the right writer to come up with it and it absolutely changed the theatre and the view of the criminal classes. It's no accident that Brecht grabbed hold of it and people have done it ever since. It's one of those marriages of form and content that takes us into a new direction.

## Music and *The Convict's Opera* By Musical Director, Felix Cross

### The use of music in *The Beggar's Opera*

Although the word "Opera" is part of the title, *The Beggar's Opera* is really a musical. There have been and will continue to be many debates over the differences between operas and musicals. For me it is very clear; in a musical the drive of the **narrative**, the emotional journey of the story, is in the **book** (script); in an opera it is all in the **music**; the story can make absolutely no sense at all – and often doesn't – but the real communication is through the music. Here, the story and emotional drive of *The Beggars' Opera* is most clear and communicative when reading the script. Of course there are moments when a particular song creates an emotional high point ("Over the Hills and Far Away" for example), but those are individual moments.



Operas are usually credited to their **composers**. We rarely know who wrote the libretti for the operas by Mozart, Wagner, Puccini or Britten. Lorenzo da Ponte is one of the very few known librettists, writing the libretti for Don Giovanni, *Così fan tutte* & *Marriage of Figaro*. However, *The Beggars' Opera* is credited entirely to John Gay, a **playwright**. He took popular fiddle tunes, ballad airs and opera melodies of his time – by composers such as Purcell and Handel as well as well known folk tunes - and wrote new words for them. The effect was hugely popular; audiences instantly recognised all the songs and loved the satirical changes to the words. It became the "Mamma Mia" of its time.

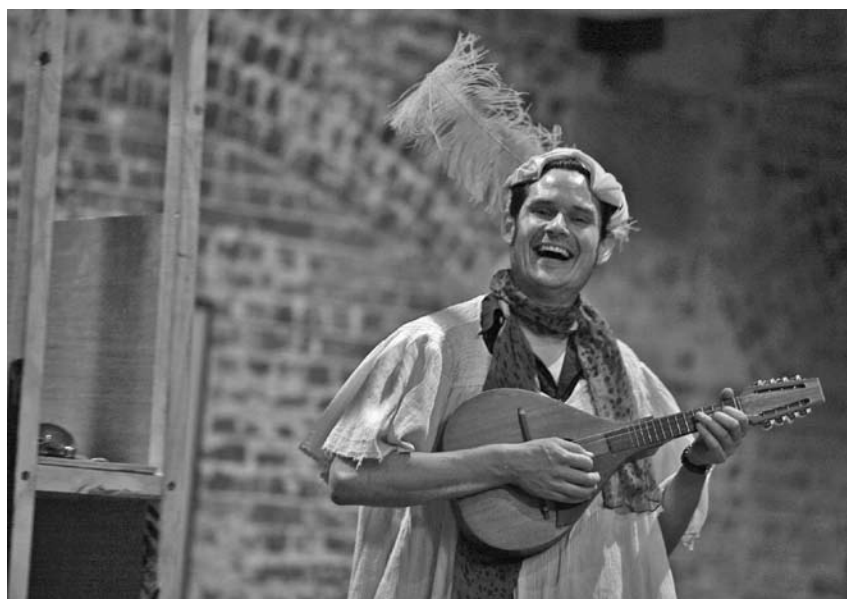
### The use of music in *The Convict's Opera*

But of course most of those songs are unknown to **today's audiences**; and whilst that doesn't necessarily detract from the understanding of the story, they miss that extra enjoyment of hearing a well known song adapted to fit the plot.

So, we have a contemporary take on Gay's idea; we have found some modern songs and changed their lyrics to suit our story. So for example, this show begins with "Sailing" written by Gavin Sutherland and made famous by Rod Stewart; later on in the story we have, "I'm Gonna Be (500 miles)" by the Proclaimers. All in all, from the original 69 songs in *The Beggars' Opera*, we have kept maybe 25 and added another 10 modern songs.

### Choosing the music

Choosing the music was the most enormous fun. Max Stafford-Clark, the Director, told me he wanted to start with "Sailing". This immediately set the range of possibilities – if "Sailing" was okay then so was almost anything. There was one particularly good day, with the creative team, pouring over the script; at each point where a song was to go, we'd think of our own favourites and try to find ways, however oblique or tortuous, to fit them into the story. I desperately wanted a couple of Marvin Gaye songs but was out-voted each time. However I got "Stand By Me" (possibly the greatest soul song ever) accepted.



## Role of Musical Director

My job as Musical Director has essentially two main stages. The first is to take all the songs and arrange them for the instruments and voices in our production. This was more difficult and time consuming than it might at first seem. There are 69 songs in the original; at the time of arranging them we hadn't decided which ones would be dropped to make way for modern songs, so I had to go through the process of arranging all 69 of them knowing that a good 15 or so would be thrown out (in the end nearly 40 ended up in the discarded folder). Another difficulty arose out of the fact that this production uses actor-musicians (a wonderful breed of performer). However, as the show was slowly being cast over many months, both here and in Australia, I was arranging the songs without knowing the instruments I might have available. Eventually, when all the cast are in place and I know how many sopranos, altos, tenors and basses I've got and what instruments they play (2 fiddles, keyboards, mandolin, banjo, autoharp, whistles, a bit of percussion) I can get down to the final arranging.

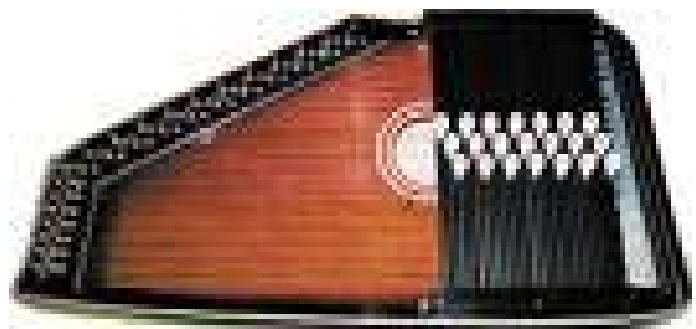


The second job is to teach the songs to the cast – as singers and as instrumentalists; and during rehearsals re-arranging, adapting, editing, finding or sometimes even writing new songs to fit the emerging production. At the end of six weeks of rehearsing (a luxury; normally we only get four) we move from the rehearsal room and into the actual theatre for Production Week. By this time, as the cast know what they have to do, my job shifts to ensuring the sound balance is appropriate in the new acoustic environment of the theatre.

Every member of *The Convict's Opera* cast sings and plays at least one instrument in the show.

Instruments used in  
*The Convict's Opera*:

Piano/harpsichord  
2 Accordions  
2 Violins  
Mandolin  
Percussion  
Banjo  
Guitar  
Recorder  
Auto-harp



an auto-harp

## Language

The language of John Gay's seventeenth/eighteenth century England can be confusing for people today. Stephen Jeffreys spent a lot of time looking at the language of *The Beggar's Opera* when writing *The Convict's Opera*, and in rehearsals the actors were given a 60 page glossary of terms from the play! Here are some of the highlights...

"Plead her Pregnancy": By law a pregnant woman could not be executed, and quite often the nine month delay in execution would give them enough time to receive a pardon or a reprieve. Women often falsely claimed to be pregnant to avoid the gallows, which meant they had to become pregnant very quickly after claiming this.

"Lock": Warehouse for stolen goods. Peachum's principal trade is in "Fencing" (selling stolen goods) through merchants.

"Newgate":



The principal jail in London, where the Old Bailey now stands. There were around 150 jails in the city. In 1783, the site of London's gallows was moved from Tyburn to Newgate. Public executions outside the prison - by this time, London's main prison - continued to draw large crowds.

"Periwig": the powdered wig worn by Gentlemen. Macheath, Peachum, and Lockit would also wear these; their high position in the underworld would procure them the marks of a higher class, the better to gain access to courtiers and bureaucrats.



"Robin" / "Booty": these are nicknames for the Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole, whose corrupt administration is the target of much of the satire in *The Beggar's Opera*. It remains common practice to nickname Prime Ministers: "The Big Clunking Fist" / "Bottler Brown" (Gordon Brown); "Poodle" / "Bliar" / "The Vicar" (Tony Blair); "The Iron Lady" / "The Grocer's Daughter" (Margaret Thatcher).

"Plate": tableware, sometimes silver but most often of pewter. A very common object of theft, as it was easily melted down if too recognizable.

"Nimming": Stealing, filching.

"Peach'd": indicted, sworn out a warrant against. One could be impeached on the testimony of one witness, but convicted only on that of two or more. An impeachment is technically a legal statement of charges.

"Jack Ketch": a generic nickname for hangmen. The original Jack Ketch plied his trade in the previous century.

"Strong-Waters": Geneva, a strong distilled drink, which became known as "ginn" or gin. Not considered a proper drink for ladies, and therefore much in demand by them.



"Jenny Diver": an alias for a contemporary and legendary pickpocket, who was executed at Tyburn in 1740.

"Talleymen": merchants who offered terms for loans at very high percentage rates.

"Turnkey": combination guard and janitor. Turnkeys carried the keys of the prison and opened and closed doors for prisoners, jailors, ordinaries, visitors, laundry-women, and all others who had business in the prison. In most cases, though not always, they also brought food, bedding, and the like to the cells and wards.

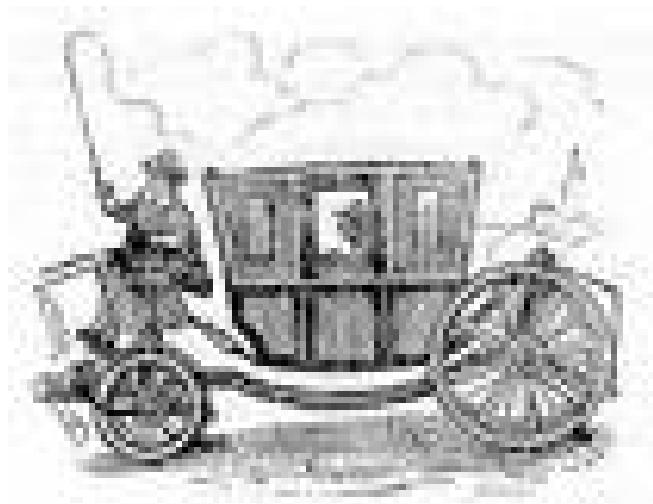
"Garnish": Lockit has obtained his position by submitting the highest bid for a Government contract. The return on his investment is obtained by extracting fees from his prisoners for "liquor, food, walking space, lighter chains, and bedding".

“Condemn’d Hold”: A prisoner entering Newgate who could not pay his fees was kept here. There was neither heat nor light, and excrement was seldom if ever removed.

“Weeds”: Black clothing, signifying mourning. It was often taken as a sign that a woman had come into money and would be a fine catch.

“Coronation Account”: List of items stolen from the large numbers who had attended festivities celebrating a coronation. Such occasions were very lucrative.

“Mrs. Dye”: a generic nick-name for a dealer in stolen cloth. Some items were dyed to disguise their origins.



“Hackney Coach”:  
four-wheeled coach drawn by two horses; seated six. The fare was one shilling.

“Vapours”: the vapours were any form of melancholia or nervous disorder; a frequent excuse for the ladies to take a “dram” -- a small quantity of drink such as gin in a cup or glass sized accordingly.

“Reprieve”: commutation of the sentence of execution. This is not a pardon, and Macheath may expect still to be transported.

# Rehearsing The Convict's Opera



## Actioning

Max Stafford-Clark is famous for developing actioning. During the rehearsals for *The Convict's Opera*, the first two weeks were spent sitting around a table and breaking the play down into units and actions. This is how the method works.

**“A unit is determined by what the character that runs the scene wants. An action is the tactic the protagonist takes to achieve that objective, and it has to be described with a transitive verb.”<sup>1</sup>**



### Units

Each scene is divided into units. A unit changes when a different character takes the lead in a scene. The unit is what the character wants to achieve. It is a full sentence. Look at this scene from *The Convict's Opera*.

BETT            Have you decided ?

WILLIAM        You were both very good

BETT            So you haven't decided.

WILLIAM        We have time in abundance.  
I am making each part of the process last as long as possible.

BETT            I might get better offers.

WILLIAM        A rival company ?

BETT            There might be.

WILLIAM        Two acting companies on a convict ship ?

BETT            They might do 'The Recruiting Officer.'

WILLIAM        That would not play well with convicts.

BETT            Might do, might do, might do.

WILLIAM        It's a chance I will take.

This unit could be called 'Bett wants William to give her a part in the play.'

---

<sup>1</sup> Max Stafford-Clark and Phillip Roberts, *Taking Stock*, Nick Hern Books: London, 2007, pp.99

## Actions

Once a scene is divided into units it is actioned i.e. each line is described using a transitive verb. A transitive verb takes a **direct object**. For example:

*Incomplete sentence*

Bett prods.  
Subject

*Complete sentence*

Bett prods William.  
Subject                  Object

Because 'to prod' is a transitive verb it needs an object after it to make the sentence complete.

An action explains what the character *wants to do to* the character they are speaking to. The subject does something to the object, which is why you use a transitive verb.

Look at the text again; the actions describe what the characters are trying to do to each other. Sometimes there can be more than one action for a sentence.

BETT	Have you decided?	PINS
WILLIAM	You were both very good.	STALLS/FLATTERS
BETT	So you haven't decided.	EXPOSES/DEFLATES
WILLIAM	We have time in abundance.	PLACATES
BETT	I might get better offers.	UNNERVES
WILLIAM	A rival company?	TEASES
BETT	There might be.	WARNS
WILLIAM	Two acting companies on a convict ship?	SCOFFS
BETT	They might do The Recruiting Officer	WORRIES
WILLIAM	That would not play well with convicts.	DISMISSES
BETT	Might do, might do, might do.	UNSETTLES
WILLIAM	It's a chance I will take.	DISMISSES

Try actioning the next meeting between Bett and William yourself. The actions are in the box, there is one action per line; match them to the text.

**PRESSURES**

**HALTS**

**DISMISSES**

**GROUNDS**

**WARNS**

**SCORNS**

**WARNS**

**STALLS**

**EVADES**

**PINS**

**ADMONISHES**

**CONFRONTS**

**DISMISSES**

**PURSUES**

WILLIAM      Well, thank you, Bett, thank you Ben.  
Our allotted time has expired.  
Back to our confinement.

BETT            Not yet.  
I wish to know.

WILLIAM      Know what ?

BETT            Whether the part is mine or not.

WILLIAM      A little time and ye shall see.

BETT            That is not good enough.  
You choose me now or not at all.

WILLIAM      In the profession, that is not the way we proceed.

BETT            But in my profession it is.  
I am on offer now.  
Do you want me ?

OJO talked to Tom Eyre, one of the youngest members of the Convict's Opera Company, who played Tom Jenner, Filch and Jenny Diver: *The Convict's Opera* is his first production with Max.



OJO: Were you aware of Max's techniques as a director before *The Convict's Opera*?

TE: Yes I was. At the Bristol Old Vic we had classes using actioning. There's a book which lists alphabetically lots of actions which we used, so it didn't come as a surprise. But it's a technique that I enjoy using anyway because it means you know the text backwards, and you know everything you're going to say - the meaning involved in the text. So you feel pretty comfortable when you stand up and start rehearsing it.

OJO: Do you find actioning difficult?

TE: There are always some actions that are more difficult than others. I suppose what's difficult is picking your action because I don't necessarily believe there is only one action for a line. The options hopefully are fairly apparent.

### Questions

1) Why is actioning useful... a) for actors? b) for directors?

2) Do you find it difficult?

3) Do you find it useful?

BEN Cowcross street... Milk street. <sup>GOING</sup>

WILLIAM Fetter lane? <sup>SAVING</sup>

The MRS. PEACHUM ACTOR returns in convict clothes. She is a confidence trickster called BETT ROCK.

BETT <sup>SAVING</sup> ~~Fetters we still have~~ Have you decided? <sup>REACTING TO</sup>

WILLIAM You were both very good. <sup>EMPHASIS</sup> ~~EMPHASIS~~ <sup>HUMOURS</sup> ~~SAVING~~ <sup>THINKS</sup>

BETT <sup>EMPHASIS</sup> So you haven't decided. <sup>EMPHASIS</sup> ~~EMPHASIS~~

WILLIAM We have time in abundance. <sup>REACTING</sup> ~~I am making each part of the process last as long as possible~~ <sup>REACTING</sup> ~~REACTING~~ <sup>INVOLVES</sup>

BETT I might get better offers. <sup>EMPHASIS</sup>

WILLIAM A rival company? <sup>EMPHASIS</sup>

BETT There might be. <sup>WARN</sup>

WILLIAM Two acting companies on a convict ship? <sup>EMPHASIS</sup>

BETT They might do 'The Recruiting Officer.' <sup>EMPHASIS</sup>

WILLIAM That would not play well with convicts. <sup>EMPHASIS</sup>

BETT Might do, might do, might do. <sup>EMPHASIS</sup>

WILLIAM It's a chance I will take. <sup>EMPHASIS</sup>

<sup>→ JUMP</sup>  
A FIGURE appears. All THREE ACTORS become fearful

FIGURE <sup>WARY</sup> <sup>GOING ON</sup> What are you doing here? <sup>EMPHASIS</sup>

WILLIAM <sup>EMPHASIS</sup> We have <sup>EMPHASIS</sup> permission. <sup>CAPTION RECAPITULATED</sup> ~~Lieutenant Peel~~ <sup>EMPHASIS</sup> ~~EMPHASIS~~

## Research

Another technique Max uses is to thoroughly research the play. Every member of the company is involved in the research. Each actor in *The Convict's Opera* was allocated a topic and had to give a presentation about it to the group.

Tom Eyre played Filch, a young pick-pocket.  
Here he describes the research he had to do:

TE: We all had to do a presentation. My presentation was on eighteenth century children. I explored the real Filchs of the day. So I looked at London and how poor children lived there. It's not at all like today's London – it was very cramped and dirty, there were cows in the streets, obviously lots of slum areas. The big thing is this new middle class, this new merchant wealth was moving side by side in the street with the very poor. So there were opportunities if you were nimble and quick-witted to filch handkerchiefs or jewellery, that sort of thing. The Peachums of the day, the thief-takers, made this system possible, because once you've got your stolen items you took them to the thief-taker and he sold them back to the owners of the jewellery or the handkerchiefs so it was a never-ending cycle.



### Exercise

1. In his introduction Max mentions some topics researched by the Company –
  - Methodism
  - Luddites
  - Captain Swing
  - Causes for the decline of the highwayman
  - The law and homosexuality
  - The Enclosures Act
  - 18<sup>th</sup> century politics
  - 18<sup>th</sup> century medicineWhat other topics can you think of?
2. Prepare a 3 minute presentation for your class on your favourite topic.
3. How does this enhance your understanding of the play or the character you are playing?

## Status Games

Max is also well-known for developing status games and using playing cards in rehearsals. Exploring status can help actors understand their verbal and non-verbal relationships on stage. Here Tom Eyre explains how a scene with lots of actors and little dialogue was developed.

TE: In the 'whore scene' Macheath's whores don't have many lines so it's hard to develop the differences between them just using language; so you have to create a world without the words in the hope that some of that reads through to the audience. So there is a sort of status pecking order between them and cards helped develop that.

We used the cards from the ace, which is one, through to ten; if you're a ten you're the highest status and if you're a one you're the lowest status. So someone like Jenny Diver has a high status because she's one of the most beautiful and successful whores, I think! And someone like Peter who's pretty disgusting-looking might not be such high status. The point was if we all had a card we would play the status on that card and a relationship and a pecking order develops.

### Game - Tableau

In the picture below, the blocking was devised by creating a tableau based on the painting 'The Last Supper'. Macheath was in the middle and one by one the 'whores' adopted a position around him. By the end all of the characters are in the tableau. With each additional character the scene evolves. Try this yourselves – remember to think of you character: what is their status; how would they stand; what is their relationship to Macheath; does a hierarchy develop amongst the 'whores'?



## *More rehearsal games*

### **Game – Wink/Murder**

In the 'whore scene' someone is going to betray Macheath. In the production, this scene takes the audience by surprise. This sense of spontaneity was created using the game 'Wink/Murder' in rehearsals.

One person is Macheath and the rest are his whores. Take a pack of cards. Remove all the face cards so you only have numbers 1-10. Slip in one joker. Each person takes a card. The joker has to try to kill Macheath by winking at him with no-one noticing. If the person is caught out, re-deal the cards and start again.

### **The Pickpocket Game**

For the duration of the class one person, appointed by the teacher, is a pick-pocket. They have to try to filch objects from the other students without anyone noticing. If a person suspects another they must suggest it to the teacher. If the pickpocket is found out, they lose the game.

For the pickpocket – was it hard/easy to steal from the others? What are the qualities needed for a good pickpocket?

For the victims – did you suspect anyone? How would people in the 18<sup>th</sup> century have protected themselves from pickpockets? Did pickpockets deserve to be transported?

NB – make sure to give back everything you stole!

## Appendix I: Actioning Answers

**PRESSURES**

**HALTS**

**GROUNDS**

**SCORNS**

**WARNS**

**STALLS**

**DISMISSES**

**PINS**

**ADMONISHES**

**CONFRONTS**

**WARNS**

**PURSUES**

**DISMISSES**

**EVADES**

WILLIAM	Well, thank you, Bett, thank you Ben. Our allotted time has expired. Back to our confinement.	DISMISSES WARNS GROUNDS
BETT	Not yet. I wish to know.	HALTS PURSUES
WILLIAM	Know what ?	EVADES
BETT	Whether the part is mine or not.	PRESSURES
WILLIAM	A little time and ye shall see.	STALLS
BETT	That is not good enough. You choose me now or not at all.	SCORNS WARNS
WILLIAM	In the profession, that is not the way we proceed.	ADMONISHES
BETT	But in my profession it is. I am on offer now. Do you want me ?	DISMISSES CONFRONTS PINS

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