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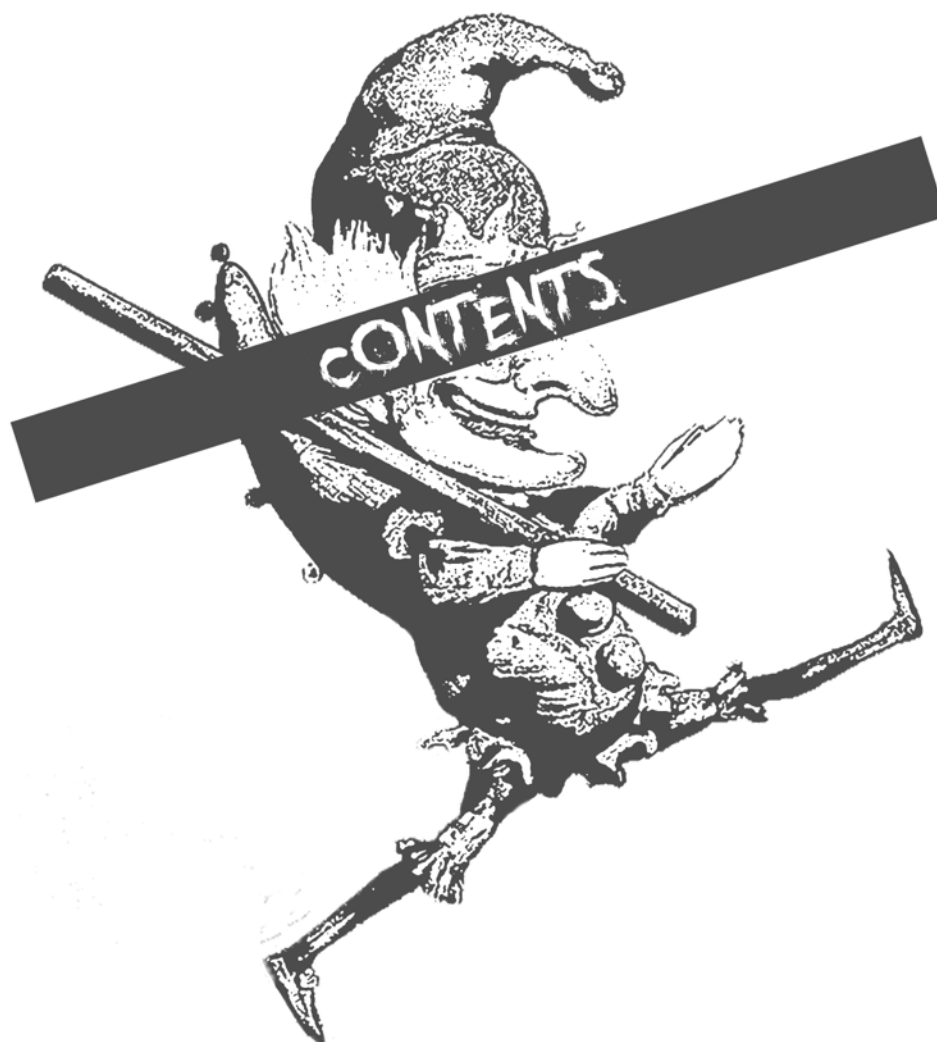
ABLE.—Mercredi 6. Avril, 1804.

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THIS PLAY

Welcome to this pack of resources about Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*!

Even if you haven't heard of *The Threepenny Opera* before, you might be surprised by how much of the show you already know. For example, the song *Mack The Knife*, which has been covered by artists ranging from Ella Fitzgerald to Robbie Williams and Frank Sinatra, was written for *Threepenny*.

Threepenny has a long, varied, and interesting history. Brecht's original is based John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, which premiered in 1728 and has been performed every since. *The Beggar's Opera* was translated into German by Elisabeth Hauptmann, who was interested in the female characters in the play and its characterisation of London's poor; Brecht, her lover at the time, took her translation to the producer Ernst Josef Aufricht, and it premiered on the 31st of August 1928; all in all, the production was put together in less than a year! *The Threepenny Opera* features music by Kurt Weill, one of the most influential musical theatre composers of the 20th century, and insertion ballads by François Villon and Rudyard Kipling. By the time Brecht and Weill fled Germany after the Nazis seized power, it had been performed more than 10,000 times and translated into 18 languages.



Brecht and Weill in 1930

Our production of *The Threepenny Opera* is only the second run of Simon Stephens' adaptation of Brecht's original since it premiered at the National Theatre in London in 2016. Simon Stephens is an award-winning English playwright known for such works as *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, which won both a Tony and an Olivier award, as well as *Fatherland*, *Punk Rock*, and many more. Stephens has adapted several other famous works into English, including Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard*, Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and Fosse's *I Am The Wind*; these are 'adaptations' in the sense that Stephens himself does not write the translation, but rather adapts a literal, academic translation into an actable script. This means that our production of *Threepenny* is true to Brecht's original but deals more sensitively with many of the themes addressed in the play, including poverty, crime, and sexual assault. In an interview in 2016, Stephens said that "there's something about this play now, particularly its excavation of poverty, power and corruption, in London, that [...] is particularly resonant."

WHY UPDATE?

This adaptation of *Threepenny* is an updated text in two ways: linguistically, and temporally.

Changes of Setting and Time

Brecht's original show is set in Victorian London, with the coronation of Queen Victoria looming, and the city rushing to prepare. Simon Stephens's script opens with the following:

The East End of London. Timeless.

This shift from a concrete time to a far less specified one, enables us to see how *Threepenny* is still so relevant, whilst making it more tangible for a modern audience. There are many potential reasons for Brecht's decision for its original timeframe, set over a century after John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*. *Threepenny* is, in itself, an update. Transferring a well-known text (as Gay's play had been successfully revived in London in the 1920s) to a new time enables Brecht to draw a key comparison – if it was relevant then (in the 18th century), why is it relevant in the new setting (in the 19th century), and why is it relevant to audiences at the time of production (in the 20th century)?

The answer is at the root of the play's intentions – the problem is not the individuals but the society itself. If the same characters and events are plausible regardless of century, then the characters are not the problem, but the bedrock of the world around them; they will always be a product of the society that bore them, because the foundations of capitalism remain the same throughout these centuries.

However, because of the way that *Threepenny* has become a vital theatrical text in its own right, it's easy to see how this fluid relationship with time is lost as it has become part of the canon. It may become dangerously close to a period drama, like the musical production *Oliver Twist*. Therefore, Stephens's decision to strip away time entirely creates the feeling of embodying an entire history within the run time of a show. Time becomes less important than the place. In a somewhat *Black Mirror*-esque way, *Threepenny* is happening now, in the future, and over and over again.

Linguistic Changes

The second consideration is language. Some of the most famous translations of *Threepenny* are nearly half a century old. This means the actual creation of dialogue feels virtually pantomime-like now, and the ways in which some of the subject matter is dealt with belongs in the past. An example of the age of speech can be seen in Polly's opening line to Mack:

'But you can't be meaning to have our wedding here? Why, it is a common stable [...] We oughtn't to start our new life with a burglary'
[taken from the Manheim and Willett translation]

In the crime-ridden and fast-moving East End, the urgency with which Polly's shock appears is somewhat dulled by phrases, sentence structures, and verbal idiosyncrasies which aren't visible in today's common-use language. The characters in the 21st century would become less malleable to fit other situations if they spoke as Polly does above, and more rooted in their age, limiting the extent to which they're Brechtian representations rather than actual people.

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It's a very reasonable question to ask – if you're going to the trouble of updating *Threepenny*, why not get rid of the lines that are uncomfortable or insensitive? The answer is surprisingly complex: it would actually be more irresponsible of practitioners or writers to sanitise the text, and to sanitise Mack and his very questionable history, as to do so would be to ignore the fact that such events and people exist. The point of *Threepenny* is to shed light on the unfair, on the extremes of capitalism, and the fact that people cannot be defined as 'good' or 'bad', as 'hero' or 'villain'. To make the text more palatable would be to make a judgement on the difficulties and unfair horrors the text explores. *Threepenny* does not and should not create an atmosphere in which the audience may feel comfortable. They should laugh at the jokes, then recoil at the subject matter. If we were to make the show more tasteful, we would be naively telling audiences that the grit of the world of the play doesn't exist, and turning into a pantomime with a hero (for our own comfort), rather than facing the uncomfortable truth that Brecht wanted us to face.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Brecht - Background and Practice

It's easy to find dozens of detailed accounts of Brecht's life, each deciding in a different manner how to categorise his life – whether by splitting it into three geographical phases (1898 – 1933 in Germany; 1933 – 1947 in exile; 1947 – death, return to Germany), theatrical theory phases, or by categorising based on his publications, but each attempt seems to lose the enigma of the man.

Bertolt Brecht was hardly a quiet or simple person to pin down by such a timeline, and he rarely shied away from voicing his thoughts; in as early as 1916, he was almost expelled from school for his subversive and unpatriotic essay on the title 'dulce et decorum est pro patria mori' (translated: "It is a sweet and honorable thing to die for one's country"). Brecht clearly didn't think so. See Wilfred Owen's poem of the same name for a version of such critique that has become canonical in British poetry, and think about the schoolboy Brecht, armed with an essay, countless poems, stories, and reviews for his school paper attempting to take on national propaganda. He was an avid writer from the beginning, though wasn't simply a purist artist as he trained as a medic upon leaving school, whilst still attending theatre seminars. Theatre became not just something enjoyable, but a vital and recurrent form of communication throughout his interactions with politics, war, and financial hardship. One of his other works with Weill, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahogany* (1930), caused such outcries from Nazis in Leipzig, that it stirred up a riot. It is in his notes for this opera that we begin to see for the first time the categorical use and definition of his non-Aristotelian (and non 'dramatic') '**epic**' theatre.

If naturalistic theatre was a carefully crafted and intricate sculpture of individuals and life, then Brecht and 'epic theatre' was the hammer to smash it all up. The Stanislavskian approach of the 'theatre of illusion' – i.e. one in which the audience may forget they are seeing a piece of theatre, as though they are a fly on the wall, is completely torn apart and made a mockery of. Where before the focus was on stage, and the audience became a passive viewer, now the focus was ripped from the actors and action and given to the audience to the point that what was happening on stage was not a surprise – it was announced on banners before it had chance to be acted out. It created an emotional distance – entitled **Verfremdungseffekt** (or 'the alienation effect') – so the audience were able to actively critique at an emotional distance. It was vital that at no point did the audience forget they were in the theatre.

There are books full of Brecht's theory that aid this idea of epic theatre, and his approach in general, and many of these aspects are visible in *Threepenny*, such as the **montage** that may be seen throughout "The Ballad of Mack the Knife", or **Gestus** as can be seen through the characterisation of archetypes.

One of the single most important elements of Brecht's theory when approaching *Threepenny*, however, is **Spass** – fun. Actors who were directed by Brecht in his plays often recall instances of him reading from his own theoretical writings before discarding the book and openly declaring the writer as useless. Brecht's application of theory isn't stringent. His entire approach to theatre is about ripping up the rule book in order to best tackle the world around us. Art is not theory, but practice: 'Art is not a mirror with which to reflect reality but a hammer with which to shape it.'

Other influences on our *Threepenny*

There are three major practitioners who are influential in the rehearsal room of our *Threepenny*: Steven Berkoff, Kneehigh, and Frantic Assembly.

Steven Berkoff

Berkoff is a British theatre practitioner whose stylised approach to theatre is reflected in the characterisation of the archetypes and individuals in our production of *Threepenny*. His attitudes towards colour (believing it to be a distraction) is reflected in the monochromatic design which allows colour to pop out and become a focus at relevant moments, such as the red blood of Mack's victims. Perhaps the strongest way in which Berkoff is an influence is his approach to **grotesque** characterisation, both of choral characters such as the beggars and prostitutes, and to individuals, such as Peachum. The following elements of Berkoffian theatre may be seen in our production of *Threepenny* – each has links back to Brecht and his ideas of Gestus, Verfremdungseffekt, or the theatre as a self-aware art:



Steven Berkoff

- Grotesque facial expressions like a mask
- Rhythmic, unified movement; rhythm created through actions, soundscape and chorus work
- Actor-generated sound / soundscape
- Phatic utterances
- Exaggerated vocalisation
- Repeated gesture
- Expressive and heightened physicality
- 'Stylised' mime
- Multi-rolling (particularly with actors changing roles on stage)
- Total Theatre (everything on stage is in order to emphasise the mood or message); the actor-audience relationship is immediate
- Performing directly to the audience, breaking the 4th wall

Kneehigh and Frantic Assembly

These two companies are still producing theatrical works in the UK, and their influence on our production of *Threepenny* may be seen primarily through their influence on physical style.

Frantic's **building blocks for devising** allow a combination of Berkoff's rhythm through movement, and Brecht's Gestus, through the foregrounding of movement over intention (i.e. movement comes first and intention is added afterwards). Furthermore, their emphasis on Spass means there is no shame in mistakes – creation of movement should be free and fun, not just for the sake of it featuring perfectly in a show.

Kneehigh's elements of **poor theatre** are particularly influential when regarding the outward dismissal of the illusion of theatre, and the creation of the world of *Threepenny* as a world on the stage. This involves elements such as the blood of Mack's victims being handkerchiefs stitched together and use of props from scene to scene changing purpose. Furthermore, their use of choral work in the background enables a constant undercurrent of mischief and presence of another audience on the stage.

MEET THE CHARACTERS

Of course, there are more interpretations of these characters than we can count, but this should give you an idea of the key features of each, and a feel of what they are like.

Macheath

Although this “Mack the Knife” is our protagonist, he’s anything but noble. An anti-hero, known across London for his criminal activity, Mack is the leader of a notorious gang. He has multiple love interests, and never stays in one place for long. He always manages to escape trouble, whether through planning or sheer chance, although these actions are not without consequences as he hurts those who love him, and the consequences build up against our anti-hero when things get tough...

Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum

Scheming and conniving, J J Peachum has a lot of power, and isn’t afraid to flaunt it. His ‘business’ requires all those from the needy to the criminal to be under his eye and thumb before they are allowed to wander the streets of London – his twisted licensing firm has financial, physical and geographical power. He and his wife, Celia Peachum, have a dysfunctional and fiery relationship which has produced a daughter – Polly. When Polly doesn’t follow the family plan, Peachum uses her relationship with Mack to ensure his enemy is snuffed out.

Celia Peachum

Mrs Peachum may be the wife of the business-leader, but she’s hardly lacking in power, or people to manipulate. As the matriarchal head of the women in the play, when Mrs P finds out her daughter has run away with Mack (a man she once had a fling with), she turns vicious and joins forces with her husband to hunt her new son-in-law down.



Mr and Mrs Peachum from the 2016 National Theatre production

Polly Peachum

Initially appearing innocent and sensible, Polly grows from a passive child-like character into a powerful woman, gaining control of Mack and his gang, standing up to threats from other women, and becoming preferred by the criminal elite of London even to Mack himself.

Chief Inspector Tiger Brown

An old friend of Mack’s from their army days, Tiger Brown is in constant conflict between the prioritisation of his job or his friendship with Mack. This indecision often leads him to seem weak, particularly in comparison to his friend, who easily manipulates him and his official powers.

Lucy Brown

Entirely unlike her dad, Tiger Brown, Lucy is feisty, pugnacious, and argumentative. One of Mack’s many lovers, she attempts to break him out of jail, and to get rid of any other women in the process.

Wednesday, 11th April, 1804.

Dissenters professing the religion of the

April 11th 1804. The following is a list of the names of the dissenters who have been registered in the year 1804.

Jenny

Jenny is one of the the prostitutes at Grape Lane, although her relationship with Mack goes far further. She is revealed to have had a long-term relationship with him, in which they lived together, and experienced significant loss. Her relationship with Mack is up against her dependency for drugs and money, though despite everything, the two seem to have a level of loyalty that supersedes legal matters as Mack claims to love her despite her decision to betray him to the police.

The Ladies of Grape Lane

As well as Jenny, we also meet Ruby, Betty, and Vixen, who are prostitutes at Mack's favourite brothel.

Mack's gang

Consisting of Matthias aka "The Shadow", Robert aka "The Iceman", Jimmy "Retail", and Walter aka "The Scholar", Mack's gang of criminals are mixture of intelligence and dim-wittedness. They begin by appearing fiercely loyal to Mack, yet are not afraid to change allegiances when it suits them.

ABOUT OUR TECHNICAL DESIGN

Set Design

The set design of the show blends together the original Victorian London setting and the shapes of postmodernist architecture to create a city which is not particularly limited to a specific time or place. The large scale, use of trucks, and the abstract shapes of the flats compliments the Brechtian Epic style of the direction, while a small stage extension gives the option for the action to break out of the world inside the proscenium and bridge the gap between the social comments of the play and the world in which the audience live. Photographs of narrow Victorian streets inspired the composition and the looming building establish the city as a place of oppression and corruption in contrast with the fun and energy of the production. Scaffold deck has been used to create levels which the chorus and musicians can use to the impression that the characters are swarming the city, watching the main action from every corner and window and inverting the power structures to their advantage. The flats and deck are dressed to resemble old bricks and industrial metals, creating a variety of textures and to reflecting the moral decay of the city.



Victorian London

Sound Design

Hearing is a much more abstract and deceitful sense than seeing. When we look outside and see drops of water hitting the ground, we feel confident in confirming to ourselves that it is raining. However, the sound of rain, when taken in isolation, is indistinguishable from the frying of bacon in a pan, for example. Sound can trick our perception much more easily than sight. This deceitful capability of sound has facilitated the art of 'foley' - a common practice in film sound design through which sounds are fabricated using alternative objects.

This practice is essential to the sound design in this production of *The Threepenny Opera*. Using specially placed microphones and objects in the set, the cast will be creating significant sections of the sound design live, with the aid of digital audio processing. This supports a number of key production concepts. The placement of the band and sound sources on stage means that all of the processes through which sounds are created are visible to the audience, and thus ties in with Brechtian ideas of making the theatrical construction evident. This also aids the 'timeless' setting - whereas more conventional practical sound effects would situate the sonic world in a more definite period, having the sounds created through abstract means separates them from historical location. Instead, a sound world is provided that is unique to this theatrical construction, but bears resemblances to relatable sounds in the real world. These sounds will be largely metallic and industrial. Through this we hope to find a balance between representing a harsh world 'beyond morality', and facilitating a playfulness in the interactions with the cast.

THE MUSIC OF THREEPENNY

If you were a composer and were tasked with writing a song about murder, robbery, arson and even sexual assault, how would you approach it? A typical answer to this may include references to the distortion of musical elements such as the use of extreme dissonance, tonal ambiguity and disjointed melodies; Yet, when Kurt Weill came to write the music for 'The Ballad of Mack the Knife', arguably one of the most sinister songs ever written, he opted for a very different and altogether more striking approach: a settled major key and remarkably memorable melody, using different textures to bring out the underlying tensions in the text. The stark juxtaposition between the deceptive simplicity of the music and disturbing message of the lyrics creates a fascinating effect of satisfaction tinged with deep discomfort, and this helps to set the tone for the entirety of the play.

In general, the music in *The Threepenny Opera* is heavily influenced by the style of the subversive German cabaret that became particularly fashionable in the 1920s. This style took elements from traditional songs, both in the operatic and folk worlds, distorting and transforming them to create a new sound world which gave a voice to those underrepresented in conventional German society. A hedonistic atmosphere was cultivated in the underground clubs where this cabaret took place, providing a platform for satire on a substantial scale, as well as offering a means of expression for certain innermost desires that were forced to remain invisible in the daylight. The transformation of existing musical traditions takes many forms in *The Threepenny Opera*: 'The Cannon Song' for example, extends the open intervals and rhythmic drive of a typical drinking song until the harmony becomes awash with bare intervals belonging to different tonal regions, painting a grotesque picture that stirs up an atmosphere reflecting the distorted nature of the man in the scene. In contrast 'The Ballad of Lust and Desire' parodies an aria, containing a significant amount of vocal dexterity and harmonic intrigue which suggest this higher style, but which is undermined by the vulgar subject matter of the lyrics. Similarly, the final 'Third Threepenny' finale also parodies higher styles, with its use of a chorus singing in unison and imitation of a classical recitative when the king's messenger enters. Through the debasement of higher styles and extension of lower styles in this manner, Weill is able to create a sound world that is truly of the people it represents.

Crucial to all of this is of course 'Mack the Knife', which, by default, because of its place in the show, serves as a frame through which all the songs are perceived. This is especially pertinent today as the song almost ingrained into the minds of everybody in the western world, all be it as a big band hit. Through the tension created by this opening ballad, the extended tonality prevalent in the rest of the play finds a place in hearts of those listening. Because the music is truly representative of the characters it depicts, it able to accurately characterise not only their outward thoughts but also inner emotions in a strikingly visceral way. is especially pertinent today as the song almost ingrained into the minds of everybody in the western world, all be it as a big band hit.

Having said all of this, despite the huge success achieved by 'Mack the Knife' both in the context of the play and as a standalone song, it is perhaps surprising to note that its conception was almost an accident: the song was only included in the original play because the actor playing Macheath decided that his character needed more exposition, and so the song was added in fairly last-minute. Weill also had intended the accompaniment to played by the balladeer on a barrel organ, but this failed at the premiere, and so the orchestra had to improvise, thus creating an early version of the accompaniment that is still used today. Without this series of coincidences, it is entirely possible that not only 'Mack the Knife', but the entirety of *The Threepenny Opera* itself would not still be known and loved today.

SUGGESTED EXERCISES

[1] Montages of the East End

Brecht's uses of montages are exactly like those that we associate with cinema – in particular, with silent movies.

Montage: a sequence of self-contained or images which quickly follow on from one another in order to distance from naturalism, and create contrast, or highlight issues

Using inspiration from the character list, create a montage of the East End. Think about using elements of Berkoff's techniques, such as 'face like a mask', or stylized mime. Also think about

- Juxtaposition
- Spass
- Heightened physicality

[2] Gestus at Work

In pairs, stand facing each other at opposite ends of the room. Everyone will pick a fairy tale or myth, but keep that choice to themselves. When told to begin, one will (speaking only at a normal level – no shouting allowed!) begin to tell the story of that chosen fairy tale to their partner. Their partner will do exactly the same at the same time (if you want to make this harder, then play a song over loudspeakers whilst this is happening. Any song by The Killers is a good choice for this exercise). You'll do this for 1 minute, both telling your fairy tale whilst simultaneously trying to understand your partner's.

The first time this is done, you are not allowed to move AT ALL. You must stay rooted to the spot and not make any movements. After the minute is up, everyone must guess the story their partner was trying to tell.

Now pick a new story. Do the exercise again. This time you are encouraged to move as much as possible, though remembering to keep it precise and purposeful. How does this change the difficulty?

Do it one more time, this time without words. How about now?

[3] Scales and Cards

NB: this exercise involves a pack of cards. If this cannot be provided, a similar effect can be produced with dice

Part One

As a group, you're going to first think about how characterisation can be changed dependent on the following things:

- Age
- Social rank

The important thing to remember here is that they should not be naturalistic. They should be heightened, grotesque. If someone was to look at the characters you were making, they shouldn't look like people but representations (e.g. a not just someone who is old, but symbolise old age entirely).

This pack of resources was produced by University of Oxford student company SLAM Theatre.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Websites

Simon Stephens on Brecht and Weill (National Theatre)

<https://youtu.be/2jXIZxQyCEA>

Simon Stephens and Rufus Norris on *The Threepenny Opera*

<https://youtu.be/xBJQQ4r8Nck>

The International Brecht Society

<http://www.brecht-society.org/>

BBC Bitesize on Epic Theatre and Brecht

<https://www.bbc.com/education/guides/zwmvd2p/revision/1>

Steven Berkoff

<http://www.stevenberkoff.com/>

Frantic Assembly

<https://www.franticassembly.co.uk/>

Kneehigh

<http://www.kneehigh.co.uk/>

Reading

The Complete Brecht Toolkit

Stephen Unwin

"Introduction" and "Commentary" to Methuen Student Edition (2005) of *The Threepenny Opera*

John Willett, Ralph Manheim

Steven Berkoff and the Theatre of Self-Performance

Robert Cross

The Cambridge Companion to Brecht. 2nd ed. (2006)

Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks

ATTRIBUTION OF IMAGES

1) <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/mar/03/when-brecht-met-weill-a-dazzling-but-doomed-partnership>

2) 'Steven Berkoff' by Lancaster Litfe, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/litfest/4720781800>

3) Photo by Richard Hubert Smith, <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/shows/threepenny-opera>

4) 'Dickens's Victorian London' by Alex Werner and Tony Williams

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/charles-dickens/9018185/Dickenss-London-in-pictures.html?image=2>