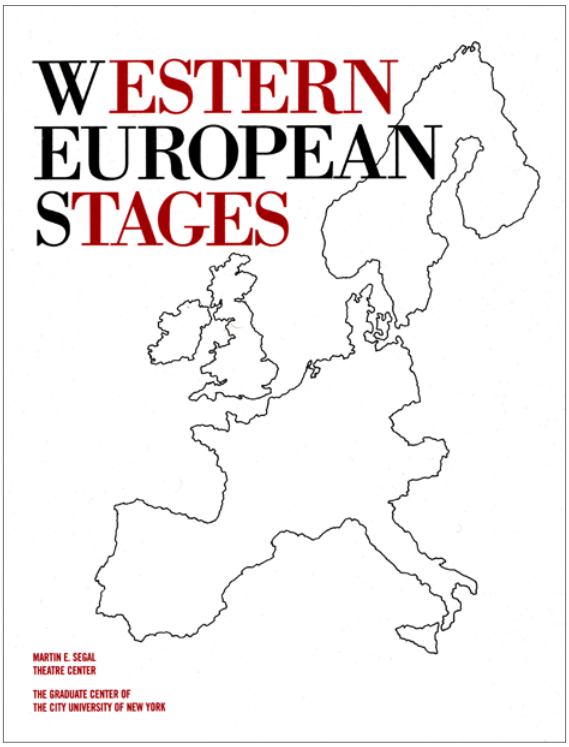

'*A Masked Ball*, *Die Fledermaus*, *Threepenny Opera*: Calixto Bieito's 2002'

A review by Maria Delgado

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A Masked Ball, Die Fledermaus, Threepenny Opera: Calixto Bieito's 2002.

Maria M. Delgado

2002 has proved a busy year for Calixto Bieito, the Catalan director recently dubbed "the Quentin Tarantino of opera" (Luke Leitch, *Evening Standard*, 21 February 2002), with four major operatic productions probing the resonances between past operatic works and our own contemporary society through whose values and ideologies they are now read. Bieito's bold reimaginings of both theatrical and operatic classics, like those of Peter Sellars before him, have often been derided as trivialized updatings by a press keen to present him as the "bad boy of opera" (Cathryn Scott, *The Big Issue*, 9-15 September 2002). Such readings, however, fail to recognize a deconstructionist aesthetic that continually probes the artifact's relevance to a contemporary audience, drawing our attention to the tensions inherent in the colliding temporal systems at work when a Verdi, Strauss or Weill opera is revived in our time. Bieito's stagings of *A Masked Ball*, *Die Fledermaus* and *The Threepenny Opera* in 2002 may have polarized the critics, but in dispensing with the often unstated vocabularies of "authenticity" they have exposed the various anachronisms that position performance as the site of fierce contradictions and at times, irreconcilable polarities.

Bieito's staging of Verdi's *A Masked Ball* opened at English National Opera on 21 February. Classified as "adolescent lavatorial" "toilet humour" (Robert Hardiman, *Daily Mail*, 22 February 2002; Angelis Christafis, *Guardian*, 9 March 2002), it relocated Verdi's study of the events leading to the assassination of Gustavus III of Sweden in 1792 to twentieth-century Spain in the period immediately following Franco's death, while the country negotiated the delicate transition from dictatorship to democracy. An aggressive media campaign conducted during the weeks leading up to the opening pounced on any aspects of the production that could be judged as "contentious," with alleged reports of the chorus in a "state of rebellion" (Nigel Reynolds, *Daily Telegraph*, 20 February 2002), the lead tenor pulling out in disgust at the lewdness of the role (David Wilkes, *Daily Mail*, 21 February 2002), and threatening warnings of sponsors reconsidering their support of opera (Danielle Demetriou, *Evening Standard*, 20 February 2002). Notices posted on ENO's website warned those who preferred more "traditional" entertainment that the production featured "some violent and adult scenes." The dress rehearsal was presented behind closed doors, further fueling irresponsible press rumors of the production's unsuitability for London opera-goers. On the day of the opening Payne appeared on BBC Radio 4's *Today* program justifying the programming of Bieito's staging, which had been seen in earlier incarnations at Barcelona's Gran Teatre del Liceu opera house in December 2000 and Copenhagen's Royal Danish Opera in May 2001. A further article by Payne was published in the *Guardian* the following day, elucidating on his engagement of Bieito as "one of Europe's leading 'new wave' directors," betraying his "Spanish origins with his passionately engaged and physical work" (Payne, *Guardian*, 22 February 2002).

Indeed the frenzied preview articles led the *Daily Mail*'s conservative opera critic David Gillard to defiantly conclude before the opening that, "this sounds horrendous . . . I have a real sense of foreboding. The feeling is that once again a producer is throwing his own twisted vision on to a masterpiece and, in all probability, wrecking it" (in Wilkes, *Daily Mail*, 21 February 2002). Bieito's decision to refract Verdi's tale through the prisms of a contemporary King, a hypothetical Juan Carlos figure, negotiating the boundaries between institutional duty and personal pleasure, clearly sought to reassess the opera's relevance for our age. Rejected by the censors when first written in 1857, and subject to enforced mutations by censorship's exigencies in the period leading up to its premiere in 1859, Verdi's study of betrayal and murder offers a challenge of location to any director who wishes to tamper with the composer's late eighteenth-century Swedish court setting. Whether this version or the later American transposition to colonial seventeenth-century Boston is chosen, the hallmark of either is that of a volatile society engaged in an uneasy process of transition and it was this theme that Bieito chose to emphasize. Whilst using the structure of the earlier Swedish version, Bieito located the work in the unstable, volatile, insecure climate of political change where a generation of ambitious politicians plays high-risk political games with devastating consequences.

It was an exposure of what goes on behind political closed doors that governed Bieito's biting production. The overture was played against the backdrop of a vast public men's urinal, underground

The controversial opening image of *A Masked Ball*. Photo Courtesy: English National Opera

toilets where a row of conspirators against the king sit reading the paper, masking their faces from public view as they discuss the guest list for the forthcoming masked ball. As a gun was hidden in a cistern, in a moment clearly appropriated from Francis Ford Coppola's 1972 film *The Godfather,* we were placed in a society of intrigue and sleaze where nothing and nobody can be trusted. Whereas the Barcelona staging had the toilets swinging up to reveal a vast semicircle of metallic pseudo-industrial towers, at ENO the absence of some aspects of the striking original design, made for a more focused stage landscape, which highlighted the plight of the three main protagonists: the king Gustavus III, his love Amelia and her husband, Anckarstroem, the king's chief minister and closest friend here presented as a military attaché. Flores rendered a stage environment where everything was stripped right back to the bare walls of the theatre, where minimal changes announced the stage's metamorphosis from royal court to Madame Arvidson's brothel. Ulrika Arvidson's fortune-telling den was here realized as an iniquitous Fellini-esque nightclub filled with whores, sailors, and transvestites, where the king—wittily disguised as pop's king Elvis—had his wallet deftly stolen by a pickpocket who goes on to meet a nasty end in Act Three. The ambience of the first act was touched by what Bieito terms "the surrealism of my country" (in Martin Hoyle, *Time Out*, 20-27 February 2002): the tradition of black humor negotiated by Buñuel which Bieito has always regarded as much a facet of his Hispanic heritage as the culture of flamenco and bullfighting through which Spain is traditionally reflected and refracted (Bieito, in Allison, *The Times*, 19 February 2002).

Indeed Bieito's dissection of Verdi's opera located imaginative analogies for the situations presented in Antonio Somma's libretto. The second act, which is set outside the city, showed a dangerously exposed landscape and it was here that the one of the most controversial moments, the homosexual gang rape and subsequent murder of the young thief of Gustavus's wallet by a group of soldiers, was enacted under the cover of subdued moonlight where the audience shared Amelia's unease at coming across the semi-naked corpse which replace the gallows of the place of execution specified in Somma's libretto. While this directorial addition was met by a chorus of public derision at the

Barcelona opening, here the scene passed without vociferous protest. The event may have been judged "specious" and gratuitous by certain critics (Roderic Dunnett, *Independent*, 22 February 2002; Michael Kennedy, *Sunday Telegraph*, 24 February 2002), but it served to ground the staging in an atmosphere of male camaraderie where institutional machismo masks a multitude of abuses and where the dangerous breakdown of law and order that always looms at times of political unbalance and upheaval, threatened a descent into social chaos. The raw aggression of the stage images found an exquisite counterpoint in the elegant composure of Verdi's melodies.

As with all of Bieito's work, the production showed a society looking in on itself. The rows of red raked seating suspended above the performers in the first two scenes served as a metaphorical device, like the giant mirror used by Bieito in his 1997 staging of *Life is a Dream,* to further reflect the themes of the piece back at the audience. The arc lights that shone down onto the stage as the seating rises and drops further reinforced the theatrical associations of the piece. This was a stage set for conspiracies hatched in arenas masked in theatrical detritus: from the glorious choreographed formalism of the opening image of politicians "caught" by the audience with their trousers around their ankles, to the decadent disguises of the court's clandestine visit to Madame Arvidson's brothel and the lavish, opulent grandeur of the final act's masked ball, Bieito situated the piece within an aesthetic of grotesque anarchy in presenting a society facing a choice between a new order and destruction. Indeed the antics presented at Madame Arvidson's brothel, dismissed by the *Daily Telegraph*'s Rupert Christiansen as "transvestites, dwarves, gratuitous sexual couplings and visits to the lavatory . . . more suited to a camp movie by Almodóvar" (22 February 2002), functioned, incidentally not unlike Almodóvar's own intricately patterned filmic ventures, as a monstrous parody of religious and political rituals.

Bieito's career, like Almodóvar's, is marked by a focus on pictorial excess conceived through color coding, cinematic intertextuality and overtly theatrical ambience. The third act's opening scene, for example, the eventual conspiracy pact between Anckarstroem, Ribbing and Horn, plotted in Anckarstroem's pristine chrome private bathroom, created both a pattern of association with the opening scene, and a sense of the interlinked relations between political ambition and personal

A Masked Ball. Photo Courtesy: English National Opera

revenge. This was the arena in which Anckarstroem, believing his wife to have entered into an affair with Gustavus, made his fateful choice to murder his comrade and king. The lavatory, that home of human waste and debris, became the key location for dirty clandestine acts of betrayal; the most private of spaces rendered into a venue where dastardly plots with far-reaching institutional consequences are hatched.

Throughout this was a cold steely environment where Bieito refused, even in moments like the love duet between Amelia and King Gustavus in Act Two, to allow any warmth of affection or tenderness to permeate the hard, sparse milieu. Bieito dispensed with the lavish royal courts or colonial mansion that had dominated previous stagings of Verdi's opera in favor of a bleak milieu where tame romanticism was replaced by a dark aesthetic of almost surreal comedy. The chorus costumes both at Arvidson's brothel and at the masked ball itself, the opera's final scene, were larger than life. In both scenes regalia served to mask a multitude of sins. The effect was like being trapped in a giant hall of mirrors where nothing is reassuring and we are forced to confront a disturbing vision of society at its most debased and depraved across class boundaries. As with his similarly contentious productions of *Barbaric Comedies* at the 2000 Edinburgh Festival [See *WES* 12:3, 61-70] and *Don Giovanni* for ENO (2001) [See *WES* 13:3, 53-8], Bieito's portrait of societies failing to adhere to the behavioral rules established to control and regulate human excess was both uncomfortably contemporary and brutally savage.

The staging benefited from the changes wrought on its journey from Barcelona, via Copenhagen. Indeed the committed young English cast drove the action with veritable gusto. John Daszak's hedonistic bisexual king negotiated sensitivity with bravado, his ambivalent sexuality deliciously hinted at with a kiss shared with David Kempster's Anckarstroem. Kempster's frustrations and torn loyalties rendered his characterization of the king's right-hand man a vivid study of rabid self-destructive envy vented out in his physical abuse of Amelia. Claire Rutter—a sexually active Donna Anna in Bieito's ENO staging of *Don Giovanni*—provided a tormented mistress battling with her illicit love and placing blind faith in the superstitious herbal cures suggested by Rebecca de Pont Davies's Madame Arvidson, who presided over her decadent neo-gothic brothel with cool dramatic panache. Mary Plazas's athletic Oscar reenvisaged the king's page (often used to hint at Gustavus's alleged homosexuality) as a flirtatious secretary brutally assaulted by the conspirators, and the antics of Panajotis Iconomou's cross-dressing Horn and Graeme Danby's sinister Ribbing firmly positioned the production within a performance register of dynamic physicality. Together with the carefully choreographed chorus scenes and Andrew Litton's rousing pacing of the music, the effect was that of a rapid, frenetically paced mise-en-scène which highlighted a hedonistic society, charging ominously towards its own destruction.

This is not the first time that the subject matter and themes of *A Masked Ball* have made for controversial interpretation. David Alden's 1989 staging of the piece to David Fielding designs was one of the most provocative productions of the ENO "Powerhouse" regime under the artistic auspices of David Pountney, Mark Elder, and Peter Jonas. Nevertheless the radical associations of such past productions have been conveniently obliterated by critics like Christiansen, who was to denounce the production as "embodying all that is wrong with the cult of the opera producer. It makes the opera mean what he (or she) egocentrically wants it to mean, rather than entering into an honest dialogue with the composer's and the librettist's intentions" (*Daily Telegraph*, 22 February 2002). Bieito has never purported to know what the "intentions" of the composer and librettist might have been, recognizing the problematics of seeking to define these intentions in a climate that differs considerably from that in which the work was initially produced. Rather in acknowledging the slippery nature of textual and musical meaning as well as Verdi's stipulation (conveniently ignored by critics like Christiansen) that the work should be set as close to the present day as possible, Bieito provided a reading of the opera that overlapped the rickety, precarious, traumatic worlds of Gustavus III and post-Franco Spain to provide a resonant stage landscape where the tragedy of the king's downfall was realized within an ambience where the squalid actions of Gustavus and his court are juxtaposed against the romanticism of Verdi's lush score. While there are precise references to recent Spain—the wheelchair bound Minister of Justice, the nineteen-seventies cut of Mercè Paloma's costumes, the evocation of Lieutenant-Colonel Tejero's 1981 attempted coup d'état in the Spanish parliament suggested through Horn and Ribbing's plotting—it was through theatrical

metaphor that Bieito framed this production, showing a previously repressed society spiraling out of control as it explores its darker recesses of intrigue, suspicion and conspiracy. And certainly a significant component of the British press corps was able to recognize that "after all the media hysteria about the excesses of . . . *A Masked Ball*, the reality of the opening performance . . . was rather more serious and far less sensationalist than some more excitable souls had led us to believe" (Andrew Clements, *Guardian*, 22 February 2002; see also Andrew Clark, *Financial Times*, 25 February 2002; Edward Seckerson, *Independent*, 23 February 2002).

Bieito's production of *Die Fledermaus*, opening at Cardiff's New Theatre on 14 September was also subject to advance negative critical scrutiny, despite Bieito's assurances that he wasn't using "shock tactics" in his reading of Strauss's take on turn-of-the-century Vienna (in Karen Price, *Western Mail*, 31 August 2002), merely attempting to dispense with the assortment of clichés that surrounded past productions. The fact that Bieito had asked *Shopping and Fucking* dramatist Mark Ravenhill to provide a new English language translation for the spoken dialogue further reinforced misgivings about the pairing of Strauss's popular work with the Catalan enfant terrible. Nevertheless, Bieito made clear his objective of theatrically probing the tensions present between the lush, opulent romanticism of Strauss's memorable score and a plot that gravitates around adultery, deception and revenge.

Dispensing with the framework of a contemporary Spanish setting that had grounded *Don Giovanni* and *A Masked Ball*, Bieito chose to relocate the opera from 1870, where the librettists place it, to the early years of the twentieth century in an society on the cusp of the rude awakening that was the first world war. Bieito's regular scenographer Alfons Flores provided a single design environment of imposing mottled black marble and red velvet, based on Brussel's Stoclet palace designed by the Austrian architect Josef Hoffman, which functioned as the living quarters of the Eisenstein couple in the first act, the grand salon of Prince Orlovsky in the piece's second act and the prison of the final act. Part mausoleum, part grand hotel lobby, its airless, windowless décor of black lacquered high walls provided a stark metaphor for the deadened transitory liaisons that mark the piece.

Act One began against a backdrop of hungover guests emerging languorously from a drunken stupor, with the luxuriant stage bathed in a dark, dingy light which immediately announced the tensions between decadent hedonism and a façade of social propriety which marks Bieito's reading of the piece. Indeed one of Bieito's key reference points for the production was Buñuel's *Exterminating Angel* (1962), an exposé of the absurdities of bourgeois conventions of respectability and social grandeur. But whereas Buñuel's characters are prevented from leaving the room by some undefined force, here Strauss's characters do not wish to escape for they're trapped within the closed universe of a giddying state of interminable partying that becomes their particular mental prison (Bieito, in Lourdes Morgades. *El País*, 8 September 2002). Here, no character proved exempt from this decadent culture. Paul Nilon's Gabriel von Eisenstein was presented as trapped in a marriage of convenience, deceived by his wife Rosalinde (played by Geraldine McGreevy as a middle-aged vamp, all cleavage, gown and pearls), romantically involved with a rotund lusty tenor, Alfred (a great comic turn from Wynne Evans), well equipped in the demands of hiding his ample frame when husbands return home unexpectedly. Rosalinde's maid Adele (Natalie Christie) lied to her mistress about tending to a sick aunt in order to "borrow" one of the former's dresses and escape to Count Orlovsky's party. Eisenstein, conned by his "trusted" friend Dr. Falke as revenge for the former allowing him to fall asleep in public dressed in a bat's costume, wants to be the Marquis he passes himself off as at the party. And while Eisenstein may have taken Adele onto his knee in a gesture that pointed to theirs as something more than a formal master servant relationship, the gestural language of his relationship with the smooth-talking Falke suggested a homoerotic pull that questioned the supposed heterosexuality of the protagonists. The intricate physical games that marked out the characters interactions in Act One—including a drunken striptease, cushion fights, urinating around a palm tree, and the tenor's avid pursuit of his mistress with his trousers down—all suggested a climate of infantilization which was carried forward in the frenzied hysteria that marked Orlovsky's Act Two party. Sara Fulgoni's lithe count was a detached androgynous entity, who watched over the antics of her socially ambitious guests with the dull anger of boredom. Richard Whitehouse rendered a dark, menacing MC, Falke, presiding over his bitter revenge with poised gusto. The mini stage placed upstage, largely unused in Act One, here created an arena for the lurid

metatheatrics that categorized Bieito and Stuart Hopps's exuberant choreography. There was something of the dissolute spectacle of Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* in the tailoring of Mercè Paloma's intricately drawn chorus costumes and Hopps's dance routines. The grotesque bright-colored tutus of the chorus were vividly juxtaposed with the rigid formality of the protagonists' evening dress. The popular myth of Vienna, as Bieito reminds us in his program notes, may be synonymous with charming cafes, waltzes and delicious pastries but peer a little closer and the superficial brilliance of the grand imperialist veneer rubs away to reveal a dangerous provincialism.

Indeed both Freud and Schnitzler, Viennese contemporaries of Strauss, were also evoked in the staging: the former through the wild, Bacchae-like chaos of the party and the discontent it masks, and the latter through the hypocrisy that veils the voracious sexuality and egotism of the characters. The perpetual party fuelled by endless champagne charged towards its own inevitable self-destruction as Act Two led straight into Act Three, a mental prison rather than the physical jail specified by the librettists. In *The Exterminating Angel*, the trapped dinner party guests gradually reduce the elegant bourgeois salon to a squalid wasteland of debris and discarded food. By Act Three, the salon had similarly disintegrated into a messy sea of wasted corpses through which Falke, promoted to much greater prominence as he assumed the Frosch jailer role, waded distastefully, trying Eisenstein through a fake kangaroo court farce. The denouement was accelerated with real masochistic bite and nastiness as all the social climbers, lying in their own metaphorical waste, were exposed for brutal hypocrites trapped in a devastating tableau of social decay.

The mood of jolly frivolity that often underpins productions of the piece was here replaced by an acerbic look at a society obsessed with maintaining an outdated representation of its own ritualistic codes. Ravenhill's dialogue succeeded in capturing the tedious self-centered vulgarity of the characters' views, making analogies with contemporary corruptions through references to politician Jeffrey Archer's prison parties and corporate share scandals. For a number of critics however, Ravenhill's coarse lyrics jarred with David Poutney and Leonard Hancock's more stylized lyrics (Rupert Christiansen, *Daily Telegraph*, 17 September 2002; Andrew Clements, *Guardian*, 16 September 2002; Anna Picard, *Independent on Sunday*, 22 September 2002). And Ravenhill's decision to stress vulgarity at the expense of wit met with practically universal panning (for example, Anthony Holden, *Observer*, 22 September 2002; Stephen Walsh, *Independent*, 23 September 2002; Jon Holliday, *The Stage*, 3 October 2002). While the *Sunday Times's* Stephen Pettitt judged Ravenhill and Bieito's textual reworkings disquieting (22 September 2002), and the *Financial Times's* Andrew Clark, despite misgivings about the playing of the humor in simply "bawdy, physical terms," found the staging "compelling" (17 September 2002), for a significant component of the British critics, including Pettitt and Holden, Bieito's pitch of "sustained hysteria" was simply "tedious." It was, however, precisely through this sustained hysteria that Bieito was able to re-view Strauss's rather staid operetta, providing "an entertainment about emptiness" where the characters were "dancing about, but as if on the Titanic" (Bieito, in Allison, *The Times*, 19 February 2002), with voyeurs peeping out behind every curtain and champagne mindlessly guzzled via chamber pots. As the phallic stage imagery made clear, it is the unholy union of vain, competitive patriarchy and all-consuming capitalism that generates such devastating self-destruction. The unflattering mirror offered to our own society's exasperating obsessions with vicarious pleasures and voyeuristic self-contemplation was visible in the ambiguous cut of Paloma's costumes and Ravenhill's caustic dialogue, which evidently proved rather distasteful to a conservative critical establishment keener to maintain a respectable distance from Strauss's social satire.

Brecht and Weill, like Somma and Verdi before them, rewrote known stories and through the process of narrative retelling offered searing commentaries on the socio-political landscape of their time. Brecht and Weill's 1928 reworking of John Gay's 1928 *The Beggar's Opera* overtly flaunts its own anachronisms, juggling a setting that suggests Edwardian London with elements of urban North American gangster culture, and the vibrant Berlin in which both were then based. *The Threepenny Opera* was conceived as a pastiche that incorporates references from cabaret, operetta, opera and jazz into a new bitingly acerbic musical language. Bieito has judged the work a product of a Brecht still trying to find a way of understanding theatre and the world, paraphrasing Picasso's dictum that an unfinished piece of art is a dead piece of art in articulat-

ing his own view of the piece as an unfinished masterpiece juggling elements from all corners of society. The fact that Bieito toyed with renaming his version of the piece, *La ópera de todo a cien* (*The Everything for 100 Opera*), gives an indication of the directorial approach he chose to take. For the radical reworking undertaken with translator Pablo Ley—a veritable continuation of Brecht's own liberal reworking of Gay's piece—resituated the piece from a mythical London to a hyper-real, contemporary fairground booth, named, not insignificantly Alabama, with a tombola-cum-bingo-cum-karaoke-cum-brothel stall filled with an array of contemporary electrical goods and soft toys whose lights wink provocatively at the both audience and the beggars, whores and thieves who populate the piece. A self contained, multiple layered box-of-tricks that opened out to lay out its alluring wares, this resonant environment matched Baudrillard's Disneyland as a metaphor for the all-pervasive simulation that is the predicament of our times.

It is here that these characters gathered in search of the stroke of luck that will allow them to rise out of the marginalized spaces represented by this deviant, carnivalesque location into more "respectable" moneyed society. And it offered a brilliant metaphor for a tarnished capitalism, which, while it has seen better days, continues to cast its alluring spell over all the characters. Positioned among the washing machines, microwaves, toy monkeys and ducks, sat the members of the Teatre Lliure's chamber orchestra, disguised as Minnie Mouse, Cinderella, Batman, the Pink Panther, Barbie, Homer Simpson, Elvis Presley—a self-referential nod perhaps to the disguise of Gustavus in *A Masked Ball*—a gorilla, and in the case of its musical director and pianist Lluís Vidal, Harry Potter: clearly an amusing reference by Bieito to the world of popular TV, comic and cinematic culture which so animates his stagings. This band was not hidden in a corner of the stage but rather placed on display among the other commodities available for purchase.

Along the top of the stall a narrow overhead screen flashed titles, observations, financial statistics, wry comments, lines of dialogue and questions to the audience. Brecht's stage directions suggest that sermonizing style in which the songs are to be delivered. Bieito's reading of them, as with so much in the production, went beyond this function, although they entirely kept up with Brecht's aspirations to expose the sinister workings of capitalist society. Indeed Bieito's fairground booth was a seedy ambience where gaunt, haggard expressions testified to a culture permeated by the toll of hard drugs. The production opened with the

The Threepenny Opera. Photo Courtesy: Grec Festival

appearance of a blind beggar who first stepped onto the stage hushing the audience as he plugged in his electric guitar to begin a brash, abrasive rendition of "The Ballad of Mac the Knife" before Macheath's gang appeared on stage and brutally injured him with a drill. Carles Canut provided a dapper Peachum, pristine in a cream suit and a romantic Cuban lilt, an émigré made good and determined to protect his privileged position at all costs. His wife, a rather muted, schoolmarmish performance from Carme Sansa, resembled the caricature of bourgeois housewives—all backcombed hair and color coordinated twin-sets—so beloved of Catalan performance group La Cubana. The other characters were more sharply drawn. Boris Ruiz's Macheath—here renamed Mackie—was a predatory, tawdry womanizer. A soiled, slimy figure with greased back hair and crocodile shoes, he strutted and swaggered across the stage with aggressive disdain for those who dared stand in his way. There was much of the aging second-hand car salesman about this characterization. Exploding in fits of roaring aggression when disobeyed or challenged, Ruiz—a memorable Lenox in Bieito's recent *Macbeth*—moved away from his habitual comic register, to render a compelling, gravel-voiced petty crook and gangster, losing his looks and trying to hit the big time by marrying the blonde bombshell daughter of the local mafioso. While *El País's* Marcos Ordóñez (*El País Babelia*, 6 July 2002) judged his performance overly redolent of Joe Pesci in first half, really coming into its own only in the second half, Ruiz's characterization seemed conspicuously and self-consciously modeled on the US gangsters he and his men aspire to emulate. The gang, however, was depicted as a motley assortment of trigger-happy hoodlums, indiscriminately flashing their phallic pistols around with an alarming indifference to the damage that they may inflict. Theirs is the culture of compulsive consumerism and murderous machismo where everything exists to be bought and sold if the price is right. As Macheath's lackeys they often shaped the performance space, bringing on the props—wedding arches, bridal table, a giant cake from which jumps a strip-o-gram—for the marriage ceremony with Polly. These unreconstituted males were always looking for an opportunity to drop their trousers, charging around the stage like a herd of drunken dogs.

The aggressive society presented by Bieito was pervaded by a climate of corruption where the complicity of the establishment was ever evident. Tiger Brown—here played by Bieito's Macbeth Mingo Ràfols as a retro cop trapped in the iconography of nineteen-seventies US police dramas—appeared a languid, lazy detective. With hair combed over his ample bald patch and mirrored sunglasses, he suggested a man with much to hide. Santi Pons's Reverend Kimball was a similarly shady figure. Willing to conduct a wedding ceremony with a strip-o-gram in the corner, and snogging Chantal Aimée's Miss Smith whenever the opportunity presents itself, he formed—with Macheath and Tiger Brown—part of a deadly trio, an old boys club determined to maintain a status quo that protects their crooked interests.

It is money that rules here, and Roser Camí's engaging Polly, clad in baby doll white dresses and cascading blonde ringlets while ostensibly the object over which Peachum and Macheath clashed, similarly recognized the mercantile climate in which all are embroiled. Her wedding gifts from Macheath are a girl's best friends: diamonds and a fur coat. But this was no meek and mild Polly, and as Macheath placed her in charge of his business interests while he languished in prison, we watched her swap the white mini dresses for black clean-cut trouser suits, emerging as an aggressive temptress who threatened Walter without a second thought, coolly determined to keep control of the empire over which she now presided.

Love is just another commodity here. As Mrs. Peachum sang of male sexual obsession, 'All you need is love' flashed ironically on the screen. The hard-drinking Mrs. Peachum presented an image of a woman driven to alcohol by the trials and turmoils of marriage. Polly flourished sans Macheath. The round of bingo, the karaoke event, and game show—with prizes including landmines and an orthopedic leg—in the background as Macheath visited Jenny's brothel in Act Two, served to further remove any romanticism from Brecht's scenario. Sex, as Macheath made clear in his dealings with Jenny, is a commodity to be bought and sold. And the array of prostitutes on show—in a range of sizes and ages—suggested all tastes could be catered for providing the price is right. The multiple spheres of action that Bieito created both within and around the fairground, may, at times, have proved distracting but they played a crucial part in rooting the staging within a world teetering towards the anarchy that consistently threatened to ruin the impending royal nuptials.

Joining the Romea's repertoire company

members, who have performed *Threepenny Opera* alongside *Macbeth* throughout the latter part of 2002, came veteran Argentine performer Cecilia Rosetto who conceived a robust Jenny trapped within the iconography of flash nineteen-seventies disco culture. Hers was a feline figure, who, according to *El País's* Ordóñez, cavorted across the stage like Tina Turner. Her silver lamé trousers, low-cut tops and Joan Collins wig, may have implied that the flesh is still willing but the ravages of age contained in her gritty, world weary tones suggested her glory years were long gone. There was something of the torch song singer about her Jenny, merging the gusto of Shirley Bassey with the melancholy of Marlene Dietrich. Towering over Ruiz's Macheath—a height difference exploited by Bieito in his choreography of their Act Two love duet to amusing effects as the "big man" Macheath stood on tiptoes to kiss her—hers was a performance grounded in the performance language of musical theatre. And while both this and her Argentine accent served to accentuate her outsider status, for *Avui*'s Francesco this dissonance gave the impression that she was performing in a different show to the rest of cast (27 June 2002).

While Bieito may have been castigated for not imposing a coherent performance register onto the production, the piece itself does not aspire to this kind of homogeneity. The dramaturgical decision to rebrand Miss Smith into an emcee provided a "unifying" strand to Bieito's staging. Chantal Aimée's feisty mistress of ceremony, described by *El País's* Ordóñez as part-beauty queen, part-TV presenter (6 July 2002), controlled the proceedings with a range of guises to suit the mood of the occasion. Hers was the slate on which all characters wrote their wishes, her responses—abrasive, sarcastic, steely, surprising, acquiescent, defiant—served as Bieito's most brutal commentary on the avaricious consumption-driven society depicted in the piece. In Act Two this included a clinical description of fellatio while fanning herself in a spotlight beside Jenny's whorehouse—a telling a critique of the commercialism of sex—and the detached observation of Lucy's assault of Macheath while nonchalantly consuming popcorn. In Act Three she exuberantly narrated the gruesome horrors of the electric chair, the first prize in a lottery won by Macheath, as if pawning a piece of jewelry. The latter, sitting amidst a pile of electrical goods and soft toys that were to prove his scaffold, was simply another object on display before an audience that would be asked to vote on whether he ought to be executed. This critique of the death penalty proved as damning as that offered by Sellars in his searing reading of Handel's *Theodora* for Glyndebourne in 1996.

Pablo Ley's rough idiomatic translation, juggling what Bieito views as the politics and poetry which drives the work, peppers the dialogue with a range of contemporary references: the exploitation of immigrants, economic scandals, European federalism, and the forthcoming wedding of a prince (Spain's Crown Prince Felipe?) who has just built a house for himself. The alterations undertaken by Bieito, Ley, Josep Galindo, and Xavier Zuber never attempted to efface the piece's wayward dramaturgy. Rather the creakiness remained, the sense of fragmentation accentuated by the structural decisions made by the team. Indeed part of the appeal of the piece has always been its inherent malleability and here Bieito demonstrated the willingness to cut and paste, which has marked his recent contentious work with Shakespeare. As such the shifting of the "Song of Insufficiency of Human Endeavor" from Act Three, Scene Seven to the first half finale in Act Two provided a pre-interval moment of contemplation on the politics of the piece. The "Pirate Jenny Song," moved from Act Three to Act Two, shifted the focus to Jenny's revenge for Macheath's treatment of her. The inclusion of "The Alabama Song" from *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* sung by Jenny on her first Act Two appearance, served as both leitmotif for her and for the work itself, a link to the fairground booth which shares the same title, and the prison to which Macheath is taken which is also bears this name. The playfulness of Brecht's deus ex machina ending, where Brown enters with news of a reprieve for Macheath from the Queen, was here replaced by two alternative endings which followed each other. The first saw Macheath electrocuted, the second provided a pardon where he was given the funds to form the Mac Bank as he shook off his wires prepared for his electrocution, screeching "¡Dios existe!" ("God exists!")

Any production that opens the annual Grec summer Festival in Barcelona is always going to be subject to close press scrutiny. *La opera de cuatro cuartos* was no exception, polarizing the critics across all elements of the mise-en-scène. *El País's* Javier Pérez Senz castigated Bieito for his choice of actors, judged unable to provide an adequate singing register for the piece (27 June 2002) with only singer Cecilia Rosetto regarded as rising to the challenge posed by Weill's music. The choice to

largely cast actors rather than singers, however, rendering the harsh songs in anything but dulcet tones, while evidently following Brecht's dictum that the roles be taken by singing actors rather than acting singers, also rendered some resonant casting decisions. Carles Canut (Peachum), Boris Ruiz (Macheath), Carmé Sansa (Mrs. Peachum), and Mingo Ràfols (Brown) all appeared in Mario Gas's now legendary 1984 Catalan-language staging of the piece at the Romea theatre, now under Bieito's artistic directorship. Bieito's staging is only the second Castilian-language outing for the piece: the first presented in 1965 by José María Loperena at the Poliorama theatre two years after the Catalan-language premiere by Frederic Roda at the Palau de la Musica.

While the piece's fervent anti-capitalist message may have ensured a rather checkered production history during the censorious years of the Franco regime, its sprawling dramaturgy has proved a veritable challenge to contemporary directors working in what appear to be politically less compromised times. For *El País's* Pérez Senz Bieito failed to find an appropriate tone for the piece, pitching it at too intense a political level so that the reiteration of excessively, capitalist critique became exasperatingly tiring. While *El Periodico de Catalunya*'s Gonzalo Pérez de Olaguer recognized the moments of scenic brilliance conjured by Bieito, he also sensed that the repetition and sometimes clumsy stitching together of the piece weakened its impact (27 June 2002). *ABC*'s Juan Carlos Olivares, *La Vanguardia*'s Joan-Anton Benach and *El Mundo de Catalunya*'s Iolanda G. Madariaga shared his doubts (27 June 2002). It is perhaps Ordóñez who provided the most astute review of the production, praising both the ferocious nihilism of Ley's translation and the charged interpretative register of the assembled cast while recognizing that the conceptual brilliance of the staging was not always matched by close directorial attention to all scenes. Whereas the piece was coolly greeted in the cavernous outdoor Grec theatre where it opened on 25 June and at Madrid's Teatro de la Zarzuela, where it played as part of the Autumn Festival in late October, with critics documenting the audience exodus that followed the interval (Pep Martorell, *El Punt de Maresme*, 28 June 2002; Javier Villan, *El Mundo*, 26 October 2002), the performances at the Lliure's Fabìa Puigserver auditorium which closed its Spanish tour between 6 and 10 November were warmly greeted by a younger than average audience whose remained vociferously engaged and attentive to the end. Bieito's nurturing of a younger audience with his programming at the Romea theatre over the past two years may well have paid off. The repertory company cultivated at the Romea, performing in both Catalan—as in Bieito's searing conception of *Macbeth*, a reworking of his controversial 2001 Salzburg staging of the piece which has opened new parameters for the staging of Shakespeare in Spain—and Castilian-Spanish—as in *The Threepenny Opera*—has provided a bilingual ensemble responsible for the city's most dynamic textual theatre. The forthcoming visit of the Romea's production of *Macbeth* to London 's Barbican Center as well as possible plans to revive *The Threepenny Opera* for Paris's EMCEE Bobigny suggests that audiences outside Barcelona will finally have a chance to see the work that he has produced with his company as he prepares his English-language Shakespeare debut, *Hamlet*, for the 2003 Edinburgh International Festival.

And while some may take offense at what they regard his desecration of classic texts, his decentering postmodern aesthetic has served to ask pertinent questions about what these pieces might say to contemporary audiences. A recognition of the importance of his stagings is evident in the press attention that now greets his openings both in Spain and the UK. His production of *Don Giovanni*, opening at the Liceu on 30 November, generated a clamorous debate with polarized reviews generating counter reviews and emotive letters (see, for e.g. Alier and Benach's reviews in *La Vanguardia* on 2 December 2002, and the letters that were subsequently published on 5, 6, and 8 December 2002). His conspicuous directorial choices of works which appear to concern themselves with societies hurtling uncontrollably towards self-destruction—as his visions of *Don Giovanni* and *Macbeth* also graphically demonstrate—indicate a political engagement with the global concerns of our time—economic and political migration and displacement, ethnic conflict, and the pervasive tentacles of a global commercial ethos that has permeated all forms of communication. Eschewing the easy sentimentality of cultural conservatism, the visual signs of his productions have effectively rewritten these operatic pieces for a new generation attuned to the high-speed rhythms of twenty-first century media, providing seminal connections to our cultural era and as such, offering pertinent reflections on the ideological currents and concerns of the age.