

* FROM ROBERT MENDEL - NU ALUM -
COMMUNICATIONS 1980 - NU ARTS ALLIANCE BOARD
MEMBER 1977-1980 - Chairman of "The Orgy Of The Arts
Account" - Responsible for production of Arts Alliance
Plays in the Norris Center, including being the Account
responsible for Producing the Annual "Mee-Ow Show" -
1977-1980:

The "Assasins" episode was dismaying to me. When I
produced Threepenny Opera in May of 1980
([https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?
set=a.10214777832695556&type=3](https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10214777832695556&type=3) - Listen to the
complete recording done at the pick Staiger concert hall
June 6 1980 on Soundcloud! [https://on.soundcloud.com/
KIOgfsRpRzU2IWgKcV](https://on.soundcloud.com/KIOgfsRpRzU2IWgKcV)), we used the Ralph Manheim
Translation, inspired by the New York's Public Theater
Production of the 70s - we were not allowed to by rights -
and I did a presentation in a German Expressionism class
in lieu of taking the final while Producing it, and a Daily
Northwestern Reporter was in the class, who decided to
write a story about our artistic boldness - he called Tams
Witmark (who we paid for the amateur rights to produce it,
and who supplied orchestrations and scripts - which we
left in the box!

We created our own orchestrations and scripts from the
Manheim translation instead of the 1954 Blitzstein
translation - a tepid, linguistically, but very singable and
popular translation, though not loyal to the Brecht intent for
the very political and edgy text).

The response from Tams Witmark was to send a "cease

and desist" letter to the University. I was brought into the Norris Director's office for a meeting where he presented me with the letter and said the University wanted us to cancel the show.

I was nerve-wracked by this, but defied him and announced that I would persist in mounting the show off-campus and would contact the press to advance a story about the University's attempt to suppress artistic expression. It apparently worked, as they let us do our 4 performances. But he said the University could hold my degree if I didn't comply, and I said, "Go ahead." I have no choice. Too much rehearsal and dedication to the show had taken place, and I was hell-bent to produce it. Bruce (I forgot his last name - Director of Norris) liked me and went back to Jim Carlton (administrator who received the letter from Tams Witmark), and got the clearance I needed to proceed to use the Louis Room.

The very IDEA OF CANCELLING PERFORMANCES LIKE WHAT HAPPENED TO "ASSASINS" IS ABHORRENT TO ME.

Does the mannheim translation of the threepenny opera contain profanity, and is that why only the blitzstein translation is available for anateur theatricsl rights to present the play?

It is not accurate that profanity in the Ralph Manheim

translation is the reason only the Marc Blitzstein version is available for amateur performances. The key factors are that the Blitzstein translation was popularized by a successful long-running off-Broadway production, and for many decades it was the only English version readily available for licensing. The issue of profanity primarily concerns later, more explicit translations.

What is the Manheim translation?

- The Manheim translation was created in collaboration with John Willett and is considered a more faithful and abrasive translation of the original German.

- It is known for restoring the blunt social critique and explicit language intended by playwright Bertolt Brecht. For instance, a 1976 New York production that used the Manheim/Willett translation was noted for removing the "sanitized and popularized" feel of the Blitzstein version.

- The Manheim/Willett translation is part of the "standard critical edition" of Brecht's works.

The different approaches to translation

- Blitzstein's translation (1954): This version is a liberal adaptation rather than a strict translation. Blitzstein deliberately sanitized the language to make it more palatable for American audiences during the anti-communist "Red Scare" era, making it more morally acceptable to commercial producers. It was the success of this version that made *The Threepenny Opera* an American standard.

- Later translations: Newer English translations, such as one by Michael Feingold in 1989 and another by Simon Stephens in 2016, have returned to the spirit of the original German script and contain more profanity and

adult themes. Some of these versions have received praise for capturing Brecht's raw intent, but others have been criticized for excessive or silly use of language.

The current situation for amateur rights

- The original German text of *The Threepenny Opera* entered the public domain in the U.S. in 2024, meaning its text can be translated without permission.


- However, existing translations, including Manheim's, are still covered by copyright and require a license.

- The Marc Blitzstein adaptation is licensed by European American Music Corporation (EAMC) and is the most frequently performed English version, including for amateur productions.


- Because of its decades of popularity and availability, amateur companies continue to use the Blitzstein version, though other translations may also be available for licensing.

August 30, 2025

public theater threepenny op


The Public Theater's 1976 revival of *The Threepenny Opera* was a landmark and politically charged production that ran on Broadway. It featured a notable cast that included [Raúl Juliá](#) and [Jenny Holzer](#). 

Production details

- **Producer:** Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival.
- **Translation:** The production used a more explicit translation by John Willett, rather than the more sanitized version performed off-Broadway for many years.
- **Director:** Richard Foreman.
- **Musical Director:** Stanley Silverman, who expanded on Kurt Weill's original jazz-influenced score. 

Acclaimed cast

The production featured several actors who would go on to become stars of stage and film:

- Raúl Juliá as Macheath (Mack the Knife).
- Ellen Greene as Jenny.
- Caroline Kava as Polly Peachum.
- Blair Brown as Lucy Brown (a role she stepped into after the death of her mother).
- Elizabeth Wilson as Mrs. Peachum.
- C. K. Alexander as Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum.
- David Sabin as Tiger Brown. 

Critical reception and awards

- **New York Times Review:** Theatre critic Clive Barnes called it "the original" and praised the "style and class" of the production.
- **Drama Desk Awards:** The revival was a major award winner:
 - **Outstanding Actor in a Musical:** Raúl Juliá
 - **Outstanding Actress in a Musical:** Elizabeth Berkley
 - **Outstanding Director of a Musical:** Richard Nelson
 - **Unique Theatrical Experience:** Awarded to the production.

Lasting impact


The 1976 revival was the first truly successful Broadway production of Brecht's masterpiece. By returning to a more raw and politically charged style, it highlighted the work's "vulgar" and biting social commentary, contrasting it with earlier, more palatable versions. A cast recording was also released. [\[link\]](#)


The Blitzstein translation (1954)

The Blitzstein translation, which popularized *The Threepenny Opera*, was created during the McCarthy era, a time when over the top was viewed with suspicion. To get the show produced and performed, Blitzstein:

- Removed scatological references and explicit content.
- Softened the "guttural sound" of Brecht's original lyrics, making the sound less jarring.
- Omitted some of the more gruesome verses from the original, such as the reference to rape.
- Made the overall show less of a "smack in the face" than Brecht and Weill had intended.

The Manheim and Willett translation (1976)

For the 1976 New York Shakespeare Festival production, John Willett returned to the original German text, restoring its political and vulgar social commentary. 

- **Restored darker lyrics:** The revival cast recorded new songs that restore the force of songs like "Ballad of Ingrid" and "The Ballad of the Unborn Child".
- **Reestablished Brecht's tone:** The new version restored the political and aesthetic qualities of Brecht and Weill's original work.
- **Contrasted with the sanitized version:** The contrast between the well-known Blitzstein version was shocking to some audiences because of the vulgarity of the Manheim and Willett translation, which was a key element of its distinct style. 

[Papp's 'Threepenny' Echoes Original -
https://www.nytimes.com/1976/05/03/archives/papps-
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[The Threepenny Opera - Wikipedia-](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Threepenny_Opera)
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Threepenny_Opera-](https://www.newlinetheatre.com/3pochapter.html)
<https://www.newlinetheatre.com/3pochapter.html>

[Inside THE THREEPENNY OPERA - Background and Analysis by Scott Miller-](https://www.newlinetheatre.com/3pochapter.html)

<https://www.newlinetheatre.com/3pochapter.html>

[Kurt Weill's The Threepenny Opera: A Rough Guide For The M.D. -](https://peterhilliard.wordpress.com/2015/05/19/kurt-weills-the-threepenny-opera-a-rough-guide-for-the-m-d/)

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[The Weill Project blog: Brecht \(2\), Threepenny Opera -](http://weillproject.com/blog/2021-07-05-weill-and-brecht-2.htm)

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[DIRECTING THE THREEPENNY OPERA - A Thesis-](https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=ad02d922f25ba484d268b8a912d80e9b30444d95)

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[repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=ad02d922f25ba484d268b8a912d80e9b30444d95](https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=ad02d922f25ba484d268b8a912d80e9b30444d95)

[The Bad Boy of Musical Theatre - Random musings from a bad-ass culture warrior -](https://newlinetheatre.blogspot.com/2015/04/threepenny.html)

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[EPITAPH \(BALLAD IN WHICH MACHEATH BEGS ALL MEN FOR FORGIVENESS\), AND THE THREEPENNY OPERA CENSORED -](https://roguish.wordpress.com/2017/11/15/epitaph-ballad-in-which-macheath-begs-all-men-for-forgiveness-and-the-threepenny-opera-censored/)

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Kurt Weill ~ Bertold Brecht
Die Dreigroschenoper

[-http://www.classicalnotes.net/classics/threepenny.html](http://www.classicalnotes.net/classics/threepenny.html)

[Mack the Knife and the Threepenny Opera If you think you know “Mack the Knife,” it’s time for a refresher.-](https://lesleydewar.medium.com/mack-the-knife-and-the-threepenny-opera-7416cac79969)

<https://lesleydewar.medium.com/mack-the-knife-and-the-threepenny-opera-7416cac79969>