



## The Beggar's Opera, Polly & The Threepenny Opera

John Gay's satirical play *'The Beggars Opera'* was first performed in 1728 and met with phenomenal success. The production of its sequel, *'Polly'*, written in the same year, was forbidden by the authorities. Gay's *'Beggar's Opera'* forms the basis for Brecht's *'Threepenny Opera'* of 1928, which is believed to have been performed at least ten times every day during its first year playing in at least 50 different cities across Europe. All three plays deal with the malignant influence of capitalism and commerce on moral and ethical life and portray corruption at every level of the class system.

**The three works share the same main characters:**

**Mr Peachum** – influential fencer, thief-taker & king of London's beggars & robber. Based on the famous 18th Century criminal Jonathan Wild & Britain's first Prime Minister Robert Walpole.

**Polly Peachum** – Peachum's naïve daughter who falls for Macheath (which occasions Peachum to see to his speedy hanging). Polly is guided by sentimentality, righteousness and unconditional love in the face of corruption and betrayal.

**Macheath (alias the pirate Morano in 'Polly')** – Rakish highwayman. Based in part on Jack Sheppard – the hero of the 18th Century proletariat.

**Jenny Diver** – a headstrong, vengeful prostitute & lover of Macheath. Based on the famous pickpocket Mary Young (who used the alias Jenny Diver), Edgeworth Bess, Jack Sheppard's lover and partner-in-crime, and on the pirates Anne Bonny & Mary Read (as evidenced in the Pirate Jenny Song).

The *'Beggar's Opera'* and the *'Threepenny Opera'* are both set in the criminal underworld of London. *'Polly'* relays the adventures of Polly Peachum in a colony in the West Indies, where she has gone in search of Macheath whose death sentence has been commuted to transportation and forced labour. Unbeknownst to Polly, Macheath has escaped the plantations and plots an attack on the colony in the disguise of an African pirate captain called Morano.



Top: Finale of the "Threepenny Opera", Berlin, 1928:

*"So we reach our happy ending  
Rich and Poor can now embrace  
Once the cash is not a problem  
Everything falls into place (...)*

*For some are in the light  
And some in darkness  
And those you see are in the light  
Those in darkness don't get seen .*

*Injustice should be spared from persecution  
Soon it will freeze to death, for it is cold  
Think of the blizzards and the black confusion  
Which in this vale of tears we must behold."*

Above: Jack Sheppard & Edgeworth Bess escaping from Clerkenwell Prison, 1723

Left: Sugar Factory in San Domingo



The pirates Mary Read & Anne Bonney (*pictured left*) were sentenced to death in Jamaica in 1720. They were both pregnant at the time & as was custom, their executions were deferred till they had given birth, however, Read died of a fever while imprisoned & Bonny vanished from the records. At the point of their capture, they both held the deck singlehandedly while the rest of their (male) crew was hiding below. At their trial Bonny taunted 'Calico' Jack Rackham (Read's lover) with the words "*I am sorry to see you there, but if you'd fought like a man you needn't be hanged like a dog.*" Read, an illegitimate child, had been disguised by her mother as a boy. She became a foot-boy at 13, then joined the crew on board a 'Man O' War', fought as a soldier in Flanders and after the early death of her first husband, a fellow soldier, she travelled to the West

Indies and eventually took up piracy, where she met Anne Bonny who became her friend and lover. Bonny had taken up piracy after an unhappy marriage to a sailor. At the time, her father, a plantation owner, had disowned her for her choice of husband and she is said to have started a fire on his plantation in revenge. John Gay did in all likelihood base the encounter between Jenny and Polly on Morano's ship on Capt. Johnson's "History of the Pirates" (<http://arthur-ransome.org/ar/literary/pyrates.htm>).

### **Song of a little washing-up girl in a fourpenny tavern, called "Jenny, the pirate's bride"**

*Words by Bertolt Brecht, Music by Kurt Weill*

Gentlemen, today you see me washing-up glasses  
And I make the beds for everyone.  
And you give me a penny and I say a brief thanks  
And you see the rags I am wearing and this run-down hotel  
And you have no idea to whom you're talking.  
But one evening there will be an uproar in the harbour  
And everyone will ask: What are they screaming for?  
And I will be seen smiling as I do my glasses  
And people will say: What is she smiling for?  
And a ship with 8 sails and with 50 cannons  
Will pull in at the quay.  
Gentlemen, I dare say your laughter will cease  
When the walls will come tumbling down  
And the city will be raised to the ground.  
Only a run-down hotel will be spared from every blast  
And everyone will ask: Does somebody special live in there?  
And during that night  
The hotel will be surrounded by screams  
And everyone will ask: Why is the hotel being spared?  
And they will see me stepping out of the door  
in the early morning  
And they will say: Is it her who lived inside?  
And the ship with 8 sails and with 50 cannons  
Will run up it's flag.  
By midday a hundred men will land on the shore  
And step into the shadows.  
And they will catch anyone at any door  
And put them in irons and bring them before me  
And they will ask: Whom shall we kill?  
And on that noon it will be silent in the harbour  
As they ask who ought to die.  
And then they will hear me say: All!  
And when the head rolls I say: Hoppla!  
And the ship with 8 sails and with 50 cannons  
Will disappear with me.



Lai Choi San, notorious female pirate captain who operated in the Chinese Seas in the early 20th Century



Lotte Lenya who played Pirate Jenny in Brecht's "Threepenny Opera"

Also see Nina Simon's version of "Pirate Jenny", - the English wording differs somewhat from the German & carries more overt references to slavery (lyrics at [www.boscarol.com/nina/html/where/piratejenny.html](http://www.boscarol.com/nina/html/where/piratejenny.html)).





Above: A still from 'EastEnders'  
Left: Brecht with the composer Hanns Eisler, who collaborated on many Lehrstuecke

## THE LEHRSTUECK

The Lehrstueck ('teaching play') is a convention that has its roots in Ancient Greek drama. The term has become associated with the 'teaching plays' of Bertolt Brecht, which explore socio-political issues & draw on the writing of Lenin and Marx. These were intended to be performed in schools and factories and include many chorus parts for large groups of participants.

Brecht wrote in his theory of the Lehrstueck: *"The Lehrstueck instructs through being performed, not through being watched. In principle the Lehrstueck does not require the spectator, yet he/she can of course be made of use. The Lehrstueck is based on the expectation that the player can be influenced socially through the execution of particular ways of behaviour, adoption of certain positions, rendition of certain speeches etc. The imitation of highly qualified patterns plays a big part in this, as well as the critique of those patterns, which can be exercised through a reflected differently-playing. (...) [The Lehrstueck] does not necessarily have to deal with the rendition of socially 'positive' behaviour or positions, since one can expect from the rendition of asocial behaviour and positions (on as grand a scale as possible) that they have an educational position, too. (...) The format of the Lehrstueck is strict, but only so that elements of one's own invention and of contemporary nature can be inserted with even more ease."* (Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 17, S. 1024)



Above: "The Wild Bunch"  
Right: Group of Hackney boys



## THE ANNA SCHER THEATRE

Many of the actors that appear in "POLLY II" attended Anna Scher's classes, famous for training many of the stars in UK soaps like *EastEnders*.

"The Anna Scher Theatre (AST) started as a schools drama club in January 1968. The Anna Scher Theatre has celebrated 35 years of commitment to the community. Since 1968 AST has practiced pluralism - integration through improvisation, inclusion rather than exclusion and whilst the AST has launched the careers of many successful actors (Kathy Burke, Natalie Cassidy, Phil Daniels, Dexter Fletcher, Gary and Martin Kemp, Patsy Palmer, Pauline Quirk, Linda Robson, Gillian Taylforth, Susan Tully) its ethos has always been community based. Drama workshops on social issues, are held at AST, in schools, libraries, hospitals, residential homes and theatrical venues. Amongst numerous other honours, Anna was awarded the Freedom of the London Borough of Islington in 2003." (www.annascher.com)

Anna Scher was forced to depart from the former AST in 2000 despite much protest from many of her loyal pupils. She now teaches her classes, renamed 'Anna in Exile', in a church just two minutes walk from the theatre she founded.

"I was Anna's first pupil back in January of 1968. She started the Children's Theatre in an upstairs room of Ecclesbourne school in Islington to give children something to do after school. Her theatre was unique because you didn't have to be rich to attend - everyone was welcomed. I went every week for four years and learnt a lot about interaction, integration and communication through theatre."

I moved to America for 20 years and on my return I saw numerous articles in newspapers about Anna's fight to keep her theatre. After hearing about her misfortune I rejoined 'Anna's Scher's School in Exile' and found that her teaching methods have not changed very drastically. Her classes build confidence and self esteem. She is an exceptional woman. There are a lot of people in the acting profession that owe their start in the acting profession to Anna Scher. Without her determination to give the underprivileged an opportunity to shine, many would have been flipping burgers for a living."

Yvonne Harvell (Acting coach & pirate in *POLLY II*)

**PIRATE TRIAL as relayed to Captain Johnson by an eye-witness to the proceedings:**

ATTORN.GEN. An't please your Lordship and you gentlemen of the Jury, here is a Fellow before you that is a sad Dog, a sad sad Dog; and I humbly hope your lordship will order him to be hang'd out of the Way immediately – He has committed Pyracy on the High seas, and we shall prove, an't please your Lordship, that this Fellow, this sad dog before you, has escap'd a thousand Storms, nay, has got safe ashore when the Ship has been cast away, which was a certain sign he was not born to be drown'd; yet not having the Fear of Hanging before his Eyes, he went on robbing and ravishing Man, Woman and Child, plundering Ship's Cargoes fore and aft, burning and sinking Ship, Bark and Boat, as if the Devil had been in him. But this is not all my Lord, he has committed worse Villainies than all these, for we shall prove, that he has been guilty of drinking small Beer, and your Lordship knows, there never was sober fellow but what was a Rough. – My Lord, I should have spoke much finer than I do now, but that as your Lordship knows our Rum is all out, and how shouds a man speak good Law that has not drunk a Dram – However, I hope, your Lordship will order the Fellow to be hang'd.

JUDGE. – Hearkee me, Sirrah, - you lousy, pitiful, ill-look'd Dog; what have you to say why you should not be tuck'd up immediately, and set a Sun-drying like a Scare-crow? – Are you guilty, or not guilty?

PRIS. Not guilty, an't please your Worship.

JUDGE. Not guilty! Say so again Sirrah, and I'll have you hang'd without any Tryal.

PRIS. An't please your Worship's Honor; my Lord, I am as honest a poor Fellow as ever went between Stem and Stern of a Ship, and can hand, reef, and steer, and clap two Ends of a Rope together, as well as aHe that ever crossed salt Water; but I was taken by one George Bradley [the name of him that sat as Judge] a notorious Pyrate, a sad Rouge as ever was unhang'd, and he forced me, an't please your Honour.

JUDGE,. Answer me, Sirrah, - How will you be tried?

PRIS. By G- and my Country.

JUDGE. The Devil you will. – Why then, gentlemen of the Jury, I think we have nothing to do but to proceed to Judgement.

ATTORN.GEN. Right, my Lord; for if the Fellow should be suffer'd to speak, he may clear himself, and that's an Affront to the Court.

PRIS. Pray, my Lord, I hope your Lordship will consider –

JUDGE. Consider! – How dare you talk of considering? –

Sirrah, Sirrah, I never consider'd in all my Life. – I'll make it Treason to consider.

PRIS. But, I hope, your Lordship will hear some reason.

JUDGE. D'ye her how the Scoundrel prates? – What have we to do with Reason? – I'd have you to know, Raskal, we don't sit here to hear Reason; - we go according to Law. – Is our dinner ready?

ATTORN.GEN. Yes, my Lord.

JUDGE. Then haerk'ee, you Raskal a the Bar, hear me, Sirrah, hear me. – You must suffer for three Reasons: First, because it is not fit I should sit here as Judge, and no Body be hang'd. – Secondly, you must be hang'd, because you have a damn'd hanging look. – And thirdly, you must be hang'd because I am hungry; for know, Sirrah, that tis' a Custom, that whenever the Judge's Dinner is ready before the Tryal is over, the Prisoner is to be hang'd of Course. – There's law for you, ye Dog. – So take him away Gaoler.

*Source: Captain Johnson, A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates*



Mock Trial performed by the crew of Thomas Anstis



Deathsheads drawn into a ship's log in 1689 mark the death of two sailors - the symbol of the death's head was appropriated for the "Jolly Roger" flag



A pirate is hanged at Wapping Old Stairs, or 'Hope Point' as it was often called by pirates.





Above: Toussaint L'Overture, leader of the only successful slave revolt in history, that led to the establishment of the black state of Haiti. See also: C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*

Right: Lowell 'Spirit' Grant, proprietor of the Nutritious Food Galley at 71 Broadway Market, East London, protesting against attempts to evict him from the shop and home that he built with his own hands. Spirit's premises were sold by Hackney Council to an offshore developer after he had already put down a cheque deposit for it and signed what he believed to be a contract of sale. The dispute is as yet unresolved.

See also: <http://34broadwaymarket.omweb.org>



Black Sam Bellamy's crew of 1717 was "a Mix't Mutitude of a County's", including British, French, Dutch, Spanish, Swedish, Native American, African American and two dozen Africans who had been liberated from a slave ship. (...) A colonial official reported to the Council of Trade and plantations in 1697 that pirates "acknowledged no countrymen, that they had sold their country and were sure to be hanged if taken, and that they would take no quarter, but do all the mischief they could. And as a mutineer had muttered in 1699, "it signified nothing what part of the world a man liv'd in, so he Liv'd well." Source: Markus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations*



Kids on a rooftop, East London, [www.thelondonparticular.org](http://www.thelondonparticular.org)



Slaves escape at full moon, USA, Harper's Weekly, 1864

Sam Bellamy's crew "forced no Body to go with them, and said they would take no Body against their Wills." Source: Markus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations*

Pirate Captain Bellamy to the captain of a merchant vessel who had just declined to join the pirates: *"Though you are a sneaking puppy, and so are all those who will submit to be governed by laws which rich men have made for their own security; for the cowardly whelps have not the courage otherwise to defend what they get by knavery; but damn ye altogether: damn them for a pack of crafty rascals, and you, who serve them, for a parcel of hen-hearted numbskulls. They vilify us, the scoundrels do, when there is only this difference, they rob the poor under the cover of law, forsooth, and we plunder the rich under the protection of our own courage."* When the captain replied that his conscience would not let him break the laws of God and man, Bellamy continued: *"You are a devilish conscience rascal, I am a free prince, and I have as much authority to make war on the whole world, as he who has a hundred sail of ships at sea, and an army of 100,000 men in the field; and this my conscience tells me..."*

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel\\_Bellamy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Bellamy)

*Clockwise from below: 1) The enclosures of common land in the 17th Century drove a considerable proportion of the rural poor into the cities, feeding the economy's need for a large, mobile and precarious workforce. Peter Linebaugh has remarked that one could "paraphrase Sir Thomas More's famous dictum about sheep and enclosure, where once East End people had lived by the water, after the construction of the docks the water lived upon them." ; 2) Two men protest at 'being washed out of the area' by gentrification at a public meeting in Hackney, East London. 3) A gang of Somali pirates who fired a rocket propelled grenade at a 10,000-ton luxury cruise ship, the 'Seabourn Spirit' in 2005; 4-5) The aftermath of the American government's abandonment of the poor following Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans*



*"England is not a free people, till the poor that have no land have a free allowance to dig and labour the commons..."* Gerrard Winstanley, 1649



Two months after 'Polly II' was shot its central premise of a population left to drown was materialised in New Orleans. The following quotes are from a collection of articles on regeneration and gentrification, compiled by Ben Seymour in his "Regenicide Reader" online at:

[www.metamute.org/en/node/7192](http://www.metamute.org/en/node/7192)

***"Hurricane Katrina [may] prove to be the biggest, most brutal urban-renewal project Black America has ever seen."*** Associated Press dispatch

(Mike Davis, Gentrifying Disaster: In New Orleans Ethnic Cleansing G.O.P. Style, Oct 2005)

***"Bush initially said that "the storm didn't discriminate", a claim he was later forced to retract: every aspect of the catastrophe was shaped by inequalities of class and race."***

(Mike Davis, The Predators of New Orleans, Le Monde Diplomatique, Oct 2005)

***"Since Katrina made landfall, conservatives—beginning with Rep. Richard Baker's infamous comments about God having "finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans"—have openly gloated over the possibilities for remaking New Orleans in a GOP image."***

(Mike Davis, Gentrifying Disaster: In New Orleans Ethnic Cleansing G.O.P. Style, Oct 2005)

***"I don't think it's right that you take our properties. Over my dead body. I didn't die with Katrina."***

Lower 9th Ward resident Caroline Parker

(Glen Ford and Peter Gamble, Fighting the Theft of New Orleans, The Black Commentator, Jan 2006)





Above: Waterside living for the upwardly mobile



Above: Homes on the Kingsland Estate, East London photographed in 2005. Despite widespread claims about the 'Regeneration' of the area, the homes on several large estates have been left to decay for the past 15 years while Hackney Council tries to transfer them to a Housing Association. This tactic is often used by councils seeking to get rid of their social housing stock - although tenants technically have a 'vote' to decide whether to change landlords essential repairs are halted before the vote so that the only hope of renovation is with a Housing Association. However time and again tenants have chosen to stay with the council as under many Housing Associations rents rise, security of tenure is diminished and available land is given over for private sale.

Also see: [www.hackneyindependent.org](http://www.hackneyindependent.org)



Above: Detail from Hogarth's 'Gin Lane'

Right: Rent Strike in Brooklyn

**Song of the washed-up people in the Assembly Hall in 'Polly II'**

*Here is the river  
to swim across it is dangerous  
Two men stand by the river bank  
One swims across the other hesitates  
Is one of them brave?  
Is the other cowardly?  
Across the river one of them has a business  
Out of the danger one of them climbs  
Relieved onto the shore  
He enters his property  
He eats new food  
But the other one climbs out of danger  
Into nothing, coughing  
The weakened one is met by new danger.  
Are they both brave? Are they both wise?  
Oh! It is not two victors who climb  
Out of the river they defeated together  
We and: I and you  
That is not the same  
We win the victory  
And you win over me!*

This song is translated from German and is from Brecht's Lehrstueck 'Die Massnahme' ('The Measures Taken')



**More about the film "POLLY II - Plan for a Revolution in Docklands"**

**online: [www.supernumeraries.org/polly2/enter.html](http://www.supernumeraries.org/polly2/enter.html)**

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