

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

David Kettle

It's only by luck that *The Seven Deadly Sins* exists at all. Things weren't going well for composer Kurt Weill in the early 1930s. His partnership with the renowned German writer Bertolt Brecht, which had produced such masterpieces as *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* and *The Threepenny Opera*, had all but disintegrated by 1930, following the playwright's renewed commitment to Marxism (and his somewhat ill-considered critiques of the two men's previous collaborations). Weill's move to Paris in 1933, fleeing increasing unpopularity in a restive Germany, hadn't brought him the acclaim he expected after his previous successes there. And his on-going divorce from Lotte Lenya, the husky-toned singer who had given so many of his works their uniquely decadent character, looked set to deny him one of his music's essential interpreters.

Enter Edward James, a wealthy Englishman living in Paris, who was backing a new dance company called Les Ballets 1933 headed by top avant-garde choreographer George Balanchine. James agreed to finance new dance pieces for Balanchine's troupe on two conditions: that his wife, the dancer Tilly Losch, was given a lead role; and that one of the works commissioned was by Weill.



Dust Bowl farmer John Barnett and his family, 1942. Alfred Eisenstaedt/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images.

It looked like Weill had been given a fresh start. If only things were that simple. His initial choice for a collaborator – Jean Cocteau – declined to take part because of the ambitious deadline. James suggested Brecht as a replacement, and after Weill reluctantly agreed, the playwright hurried from his exile in Switzerland to Paris specially to work on the piece. Lenya said yes to playing a central role, despite the divorce – but her lover of the time, Otto Pasetti, was also to be in the cast. (Weill himself only added to the sexual intrigue: he was having an affair with the wife of Caspar Neher, the production's designer.) But how to follow the English financier's other stipulation, that his dancer wife should have a lead role? Noticing a striking resemblance between

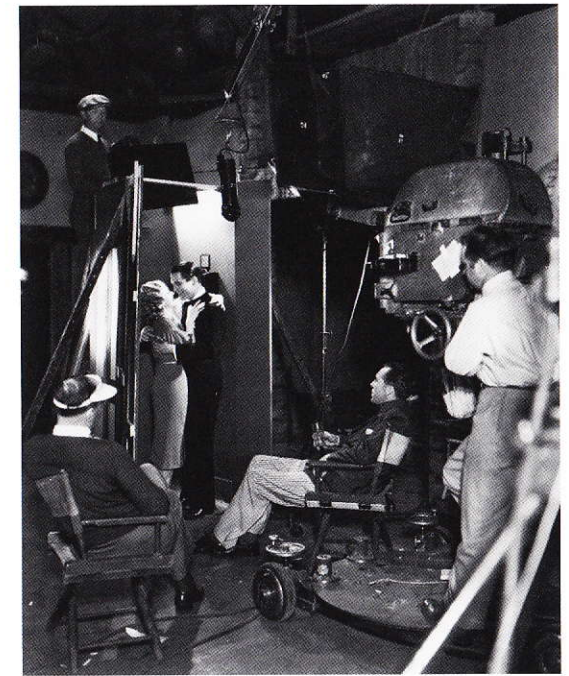
Losch and Lenya, James made it a requirement that his spouse should dance opposite the singer. And hence *The Seven Deadly Sins*' unique and slightly perplexing characters of Anna I and Anna II were born.

Essentially two sides of a single person, Anna I and Anna II are the main protagonists in Brecht and Weill's final collaboration, a bitter critique of middle-class values. Anna I sings; Anna II dances. Anna I is practical, cynical and focused on money; Anna II is emotional, impulsive and easily manipulated. Travelling around America to earn money to build their family a new house in Louisiana, the two Annas encounter sins at every turn, but it's Anna II who is 'cured' of them in Brecht's vitriolic attack on capitalism. She overcomes her 'pride' in refusing to bear all in a Memphis strip club when her sister encourages her to wear skimpier clothing in order to bring in more money. She defeats her 'lust' in Boston by turning her back on the man she truly loves to go off with a wealthy patron who will support the two sisters. And in Los Angeles, it's her 'wrath' that almost gets the two sisters fired from a movie studio after she shows her frustration at injustice in the film world.

Brecht turns the traditional morality tale on its head: in his world, the sins are virtues that the Annas must overcome in order to live a bourgeois, capitalist life. The Annas' family, back home in Louisiana, is sung by a quartet of male voices (the mother, logically, being the bass) who maintain an ironic commentary on the girls' actions throughout.

As in his previous, highly successful stage works, Weill's music for *The Seven Deadly Sins* matches Brecht's contemporary references with its use of popular styles – foxtrot, dance music, barbershop quartet, solemn church chorale. His trademark wind-heavy, acidic-sounding orchestration, so familiar from *The Threepenny Opera*, is mellowed slightly for *The Seven Deadly Sins*, where stringed instruments come more to the fore. Yet there's still the distinct feel of dance-band music in the songs, emphasised by the unmistakable twang of the banjo and the stuttering percussion in Weill's orchestra.

Weill completed *The Seven Deadly Sins* quickly between mid-April and early May 1933, and the premiere took place in Paris on 7 June. It's hardly surprising that reviews were mixed: the work was presented in a taxing programme alongside no fewer than five other short ballets,



Jean Harlow and Chester Morris in *Red-Headed Woman* (1932), directed by Jack Conway, MGM/The Kobal Collection.



A woman in a frilled wrap tries on shoes, c.1930. General Photographic Agency/Getty Images.

and its text was sung untranslated in German, so that the piece's biting satire was all but lost on the French-speaking audience.

The composer later admitted a certain frustration with an emerging anti-Weill contingent in Paris. And indeed it seemed that the resentment he encountered in Berlin may have followed him to the French capital: in a concert later that year, French composer Florent Schmitt heckled Weill, shouting, 'Vive Hitler! We have enough bad musicians in France without being sent German Jews as well!' Weill's mind was made up: two years later he boarded a ship in Cherbourg, destined to begin a new life in the USA.

David Kettle is a journalist and writer on music who has written for *BBC Music Magazine*, *The Strad*, *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *Folk Roots*.

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS IN SCOTLAND

The Scottish premiere was in 1961 at the Edinburgh Festival, when *The Seven Deadly Sins* was performed by Scottish Theatre Ballet (later Scottish Ballet), directed and choreographed by Dunfermline-born Kenneth MacMillan, later to become director of the Royal Ballet. Alexander Gibson was in the pit, and Murray Dickie, another Scot, led the male quartet. The star of the show was Cleo Laine as Anna.

In 1982, the Scottish Chamber Orchestra gave concert performances in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen conducted by the young Simon Rattle.

Stephen Fraser operascotland.org, the website for opera listings and performance history.

BIOGRAPHIES

Peter Baldwin – Male Roles

Peter Baldwin graduated from London Studio Centre in 2003. He previously attended the BRIT school of performing arts and Central School of Ballet. His work has taken him worldwide, performing in Portugal, Italy, Israel and America, as well as all over the UK. He has continued to work in a variety of genres, including theatre, arena, film and TV. He has just completed a tour with Act One, affiliated with ARC dance company.

Jessica Cottis – Conductor

Jessica Cottis recently completed a two-year appointment as Assistant Conductor of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and Conducting Fellow at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. Increasingly in demand as a guest conductor, she recently made her BBC Proms debut, and conducted the premieres of James Dillon's *Nine Rivers* (BBC SSO) and Anna Meredith's *Tarantula in Petrol Blue* (Aldeburgh). She is Artistic Director of Bloomsbury Opera and guest conductor of Red Note Ensemble. She worked professionally as an organist in London and Paris before studying at the Royal Academy of Music where she was awarded the top conducting prizes on graduation.

Grahame Gardner – Lighting Designer

Grahame Gardner was born in Glasgow and studied at Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh and the University of Rochester, New York. As Chief Electrician for Scottish Ballet, he designed lighting for many shows including *Sonata in Time*, *Prisoners*, *Cheri*, *Carmen* and *Esprit*. He has designed for Tabula Rasa Dance Company, Scottish Dance Theatre, Janice Parker Projects and Claire Cunningham, and *Cinderella Pilot Error*, *Les Amoureux* and *Miranda* for Company Chordelia. He has also worked with Paragon Ensemble, AIFY Opera Garden and Theatre Cryptic. He is Associate Lighting Designer for Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake*.

Janis Hart – Designer

Janis Hart's theatre/dance credits include residencies at the Plymouth Theatre Royal, Theatr Powys, Worcester Swan Theatre, London Bubble Theatre Co., South Hill Park Art Centre and Derby Playhouse. Her freelance work has included companies all over Britain, and as an art director for film. She has enjoyed many interesting collaborations in unusual spaces, including an abandoned hospital in

Birmingham, the banks of the Water of Leith, Methil Docks and London's urban spaces.

Peter Van Hulle – Brother

Peter Van Hulle studied at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and the National Opera Studio. His roles include Hotel Porter *Death in Venice* (English National Opera, La Monnaie, La Scala); Dr Caius *Falstaff*, Goro *Madama Butterfly*, Charles Lamb *Monster*, Rector *Peter Grimes* (Scottish Opera); Menelaus *La belle Hélène*, Borsa *Rigoletto*, Pong *Turandot*, Snout *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (ENO); Slave *The Assassin Tree* by Stuart MacRae (Edinburgh Festival/Royal Opera House). He has also sung for Opera Holland Park, Mid Wales Opera, English Touring Opera and the Almeida, Buxton and Warwick festivals.

Nadine Livingston – Anna I

Nadine Livingston was born in Glasgow and studied at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester with Barbara Robotham, where she was the winner of a number of prizes. Roles performed there included Tatyana *Eugene Onegin* and Rosalinde *Die Fledermaus*. She has sung with the Goldberg Ensemble, and with the Hallé orchestra and Sir Mark Elder. She was a Scottish Opera Emerging Artist from 2009 to 2011, singing title role *Kátya Kabanová*, Musetta *La bohème*, Susanna *The Marriage of Figaro* and Gilda *Rigoletto*.

Kally Lloyd-Jones – Director/Choreographer

Kally Lloyd-Jones, Company Chordelia's founder and Artistic Director, was born and raised in Scotland. She trained at the Theatre Arts Ballet School and Central School of Ballet in London, and has an MA in English Literature and Film Studies from Glasgow University. She has worked extensively as a choreographer, dancer, movement director, teacher and choreologist in Scotland, as well as in London, Sweden and Canada. She has worked with the Royal Swedish Ballet, The Royal Ballet School, The Benesh Institute, David Hughes Dance Company, Spinal Chord Projects, Tartan Chameleon, Traverse Theatre, Ankur Productions, Paragon Ensemble, Ontario Ballet Theatre, Desrosiers Dance Theatre, Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and Scottish Opera. She has directed *Kátya Kabanová* for Scottish Opera and *The Rape of Lucretia* for St Andrews Opera, and was Associate Director on *Orlando* for Scottish Opera.