

Kurt Weill

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Lost in the Stars and the Quest for American Opera

by Kim H. Kowalke

Shortly after Kurt Weill arrived in New York in September 1935, George Gershwin invited him to the dress rehearsal of *Porgy and Bess* at the Alvin Theatre. "It's a great country where such a work can be written--and performed," Weill told a reporter, in obvious reference to his own situation as a refugee from Nazi Germany, where performances of his works, including *The Threepenny Opera*, had been banned. After repeated postponements of rehearsals for Max Reinhardt's production of *The Eternal Road* prompted the composer to decide to stay in America permanently, he dismissed as "crazy" conductor Maurice Abravanel's suggestion that he write an opera for the Met. The composer suggested instead that "if there will ever be anything like an American opera, it is bound to come out of Broadway. I'm all in favor of the Metropolitan--as a museum, but not to start a movement of an American musical theater." He soon set to work on *Johnny Johnson* with Paul Green, the first of a series of distinguished American playwrights and poets whom Weill would recruit as librettists in a sustained effort to create new hybrid forms of musical theater situated at various points along the continuum between spoken drama and traditional opera.

For the remainder of a career cut short by a heart attack at age 50, *Porgy and Bess* would serve as an inspiration for the kind of American opera Weill hoped to create. Faulting *Porgy* only for "its tendency to tell everything in music," Weill served as the unofficial advisor for the successful 1942 Broadway revival, which replaced much of the recitative with spoken dialogue, cut a half hour from the running time, and managed a run of 286 performances. Teaming up with Moss Hart to convince Ira Gershwin to return to Broadway for the first

time after his brother's death, Weill had established his own box-office credentials with *Lady in the Dark* (1941). This daring "musical play" initiated a decade of rivalry with Richard Rodgers, who had just opened *Pal Joey*. In 1943, the long-running *One Touch of Venus* (starring Mary Martin) followed close on the heels of the landmark *Oklahoma!* Then Weill's "Broadway opera" *Street Scene* escalated the operatic aspirations of *Carousel* to a level inviting favorable comparisons with *Porgy*. In 1948 Weill and Alan Jay Lerner responded to Hammerstein's experimental book for *Allegro* with *Love Life*, now recognized as the first "concept musical." The next year *South Pacific* and *Lost in the Stars* went head to head in their attempts to address racial bigotry and injustice, albeit through the distanced lenses of Polynesia and South Africa respectively.

Weill's and Maxwell Anderson's "musical tragedy" came full circle back to *Porgy*. No white principals sang, and the predominantly African-American cast was headed by Todd Duncan, the original Porgy. His brother John Kumalo was played by the original Crown, Warren Coleman. Having been unavailable to direct *Street Scene*, Rouben Mamoulian--the director not only of both the original *Porgy* and *Porgy and Bess*, but also *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel*--staged the production with such authority that he became almost a co-author.

Opening on October 30, 1949, *Lost in the Stars* launched a season of "opera on Broadway" that included premieres of Blitzstein's *Regina*, Menotti's *The Consul*, and Britten's *Rape of Lucretia*. Indeed, between the 1942 revival of *Porgy and Bess* and the failure in 1958 of Menotti's *Maria Golovin*, eighteen Broadway productions would either explicitly present themselves as operas or be discussed as such by critics. Forged in a commercial crucible under fire from the ruthless judgment of a Broadway audience, these operas enjoyed a fate quite different from the twenty operas by American composers that the Met had produced prior to 1958: thirteen "Broadway operas" (including both *Lost in the Stars* and *Street Scene*) were subsequently taken into the repertory of the New York City Opera. No American opera from the Met entered the repertory.

Weill's last stage work survived him on Broadway by just three months, achieving an initial run of 281 performances. (In contrast, by then the most frequently performed American opera at the Met had managed a total of just sixteen performances over four seasons in the 1930s.) The audacity of producing on Broadway in 1949 an indictment of apartheid as a metaphor for the racial injustice of "separate but equal" segregation in the United States is perhaps best evinced by two related events: cancellation of the national tour of *Lost in the Stars* because African-American cast members were not allowed to stay in the same hotels as whites, and the long overdue breach of the barrier against African-American singers at the Met--five years after *Lost in the Stars* had closed on Broadway. In contrast to *Porgy and Bess*, *Lost in the Stars* confronted a controversial socio-political issue head-on.

"For years I've wanted to write something which would state the position and perhaps illuminate the tragedy of our own negroes," Weill's friend, neighbor, and preferred collaborator Maxwell Anderson had written to the South African novelist Alan Paton in March 1948 in an effort to secure the dramatization rights for *Cry, the Beloved Country*. "I think you have said as much as can be said both for your country and ours." Initially Anderson and Weill envisioned that the principal roles would be entirely spoken, and only the Chorus and its

Leader would sing: "to translate your novel into stage form without dulling its edge or losing its poetry would only be possible if a chorus--a sort of Greek chorus--were used to tie together the great number of scenes, and to comment on the action as you comment in the philosophic and descriptive passages." Early on Weill and Anderson also agreed to avoid any sense of "faux-African dialects" in either music or dialogue.

But a year later, individual songs for Kumalo and a few of the other black characters had been added, including a quartet of decade-old trunk songs for a show entitled "Ulysses Africanus," originally written with Paul Robeson in mind: "The Little Grey House," "Stay Well," "Lover Man" (revised into "Trouble Man"), and the title song, "Lost in the Stars," which both Walter Huston and Frank Sinatra had already recorded. Positioned as the finale to Act I, the latter song achieved titular status for the show because the film rights to *Cry, the Beloved Country* had already been sold, and the Playwrights' Producing Company hoped to shelter the musical tragedy's own potential movie deal under a title unrelated to the novel's. Although Paton otherwise admired Weill's score for the play, he objected strenuously to the existentialist despair of the title song, in which the "God who's gone away" misrepresented both his own and Stephen Kumalo's religious beliefs.

After Duncan accepted the leading role, Mamoulian pushed the authors to expand the score in two contrasting directions. "Here is a chance for Kurt's score to rise to a high operatic level. Let's have a sweeping powerful aria, deeply emotional and of tragic dimensions, which should conclude with the cry of a loving, bleeding heart, biblical in stature. O Tixo, Tixo, help me!" Still later in the rehearsal process he asked for a very different sort of 11 o'clock number for Alex, Kumalo's grandson: "every laugh, chuckle or smile that can be honestly brought into our play will be like a drink of water in the desert." Herbert Coleman's rendition of "Big Mole" would stop the show nightly, a much needed break from the nearly unbearable tension of the final two scenes.

Thus, by opening night the score of the musical tragedy unfolded poly-stylistically on three distinct levels: the "operatic" utterances of Stephen and, to a lesser extent, Irina; the "tribal" numbers of the Leader and the Chorus, commenting from a perspective unavailable to the principal characters, often with lyrics lifted almost verbatim from the novel and music suffused with pentatonic inflections; the "popular" Broadway idioms of "Thousands of Miles" and "Who'll Buy." Critics, however, divided over the proper designation for and merits of this dramaturgical counterpoint of styles and genres. In a review titled "Opera on Broadway," the music critic of the *Times* deemed it "the best thing Weill has done for the theater" but expressed reservations about the "Broadway touches." Weill countered, "The real success of the piece to me is the fact that the non-specialist audience accepted a lot of very serious, tragic, quite un-Broadway-ish music of operatic dimensions, together with some songs written in a more familiar style." Previously not much of a Weill fan, Virgil Thomson declared *Lost in the Stars* a "masterpiece of musical application to dramatic narrative," its score for a violin-less chamber ensemble "Weill's finest work of orchestral craft," and its composer "a master of musico-dramatic design." "This music does all the right things at all the right times. Its layout is perfection. It is a play with musical numbers, a *Singspiel*."

Thomson's observation implicitly invoked Weill's other lifelong inspiration for creating hybrid, genre-busting stage works: Mozart's *Magic Flute*. In 1937 Weill had observed that "*The Magic Flute* was written on commission and in collaboration with a commercial theatre impresario; it is an ideal example of the union of popular music and the highest degree of artistic power." If, then, Weill's final work for Broadway took its bearing from the complementary models of *Porgy and Bess* and *Die Zauberflöte*, what made his own voice so distinctive? During an intermission feature for "Opera News on the Air" in December 1949, host Boris Goldovsky asked him what it was "that brings out the Weill in Weill." "I seem to have a very strong reaction in the awareness of the suffering of underprivileged people; of the oppressed, the persecuted," Weill answered. "In the music I wrote for *Lost in the Stars*, I can see in retrospect that when the music involved human suffering, it is, for better or worse, pure Weill."