



Knocking their socks off
"Threepenny Opera:" A review from the inside

By Nan Lincoln | Apr 07, 2010

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(Photo by: Robin Farrin)

The cast of the New Surry Theatre's production of "The Threepenny Opera," including Bar Harbor Times reporter and actress, Nan Lincoln, as Pirate Jenny far right.

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BLUE HILL — Normally by this time I would have written a review for The New Surry Theatre production of the "Threepenny Opera," which opened last month at the Town Hall Theater in Blue Hill and has its final two performances Friday and Saturday night, April 9 and 10. While Blue Hill is a bit out of the Bar Harbor Times' territory, I have always found NST shows worth the 45-minute drive from Mount Desert Island, and almost invariably have much praise for these shows, especially when directors Bill Raiten and his protege, Shari John are involved.

Well, Raiten and John are involved in this one, so as usual I do have many good things to say. But this time, I am personally involved as well, playing a cameo role as Pirate Jenny. So instead of being from the outside looking in, my review is from inside, looking out.

The last time I was in a play was in 2000, when my daughter, Alexandra, cast me to play opposite her in "night Mother," her senior project at College of the Atlantic. Recalling the work involved in rehearsals, line memorizing, not to mention the emotional drain of performing the story of a mother unsuccessfully

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trying to talk her daughter out of suicide, I was in no great rush to get involved in another theatrical production other than as an enthusiastic member of an audience and a reviewer.

Then along came Pirate Jenny. My dad used to talk about having seen the legendary Lotte Lenya perform this blood curdling song from the "Threepenny Opera" back around the time I was born, in the 1940s. Since then many other singers have taken on the song, most famously, perhaps, Nina Simon. So last fall when George Swanson asked me to sing "Pirate Jenny" for a concert benefit he was organizing for the Mount Desert Island food pantries, I was happy to give it a go. It was a great experience, but also a frustrating one because, I soon learned, you can't sing the "Pirate Jenny" song just once.

It just happens to be one of the best songs ever written for a woman - full of passion, anger and a poignant wistfulness — along the same lines as the recently popular "And I'm Telling You, I'm Not Going."

So it is no wonder, that Lotte Lenya literally pirated the song from the first production of "Threepenny Opera," using her clout as a major German stage star to take the song away from the woman (who will forever remain in obscurity) playing the character of Polly Peachum.

Anyway, when I learned that The New Surry Theatre was planning to produce the whole musical this spring, I essentially pulled a Lotte Lenya move. I told directors Raiten and John that I did not want a

speaking part in the play, but that I would love to sing "Pirate Jenny" again, and again and again.

They said yes, but talked me into also joining the ensemble of beggars and whores who make up the chorus of the play.

I am so glad I acquiesced, because it has been a good 20 years since I was a member of a large theatrical cast and I had forgotten, along with all the hard work involved in being in a show, how much fun it is. I thoroughly recommend getting involved with your local theater to anyone with a modicum of talent who is prone to cabin fever, or who finds themselves wasting their evenings watching "Dancing with the Stars" or "American Idol."

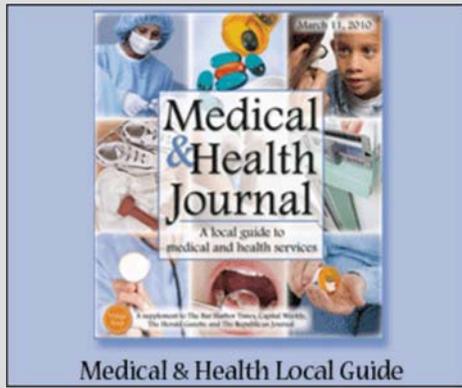
I was familiar with the work of some of my fellow cast members. Annie Poole playing Mrs. Peachum, Ralph Chapman playing Jake, Jim Fisher as Tiger Brown and 14-year-old Nolan Ellsworth stood out in my memory as being excellent in several previous NST productions. I had also seen Chris Candage, who plays MacHeath, as the brainless pretty boy, Hero in "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" a couple of years ago. And while I remembered he had a fine tenor voice, I recall thinking his acting was a bit stiff.

Wow, what a difference a few years and a perfectly cast part makes! As a burly bit of beefcake, Candage, as the menacing Mack the Knife, got to show off his acting range. In this performance he is at times sensuous, brutal, frightening, funny and also oddly appealing.

Now here is one of the neat things about being behind the scenes — one gets to know the back-story of one's fellow performers. So in the course of several months of rehearsals, I discovered that Candage, at age 25, when he is not performing, works with his dad as a fish dealer in the summer and a woodsman in the winter. Given his stocky, muscular physique — a perfect body type for MacHeath — it was no great surprise to hear that he makes his living with some sort of physical labor. Nor was it a surprise that he starred as an athlete in high school at George Stevens Academy. It is somewhat surprising, however, that he was also a theater geek at George Stevens, and that one of his first roles was as the cross dressing Jerry/ Daphne in the stage version of "Some Like It Hot."

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"Yeah I got a little razzing from my team members, and even the coaches," said Candage in one of our pre-rehearsal conversations. "But I discovered I was just as good at singing as I was at sports, so I didn't let it stop me. I also knew that theater was something I would probably want as an active part of my life for a lot longer than baseball and basketball."

In fact, Candage majored in voice and theater arts at Plymouth State College in New Hampshire and is on the cusp of making the big move to New York, California or Chicago to try his luck at making it as a professional actor.

"I am so grateful that the New Surry Theatre has been here for me as a place to hone my acting skills and that the community seems to enjoy what I am doing," said Candage. "But it is a pretty small pond, and I think I'll be ready, before long, to test out some bigger waters."

My conversation with Candage is reminiscent of one I had about 30 years ago with Bar Harbor native Herb Mitchell, when we were both in the Ellsworth Player's production of "Carousel." Mitchell was planning to head off to California as soon as the show closed, to give Hollywood a try.

As most people around here know, it turned out to be a good move and Herb earned a living as a working actor for 25 years on the West Coast, before recently retiring back to Blue Hill. Candage, who is starting out much younger, may have an even better shot at the big time.

Another cast member is making a sort of opposite journey. Having been a professional performer, stage actor and acting teacher on the West Coast, Robin Jones, who plays Mr. Peachum, emigrated to Stockton Springs a couple of years ago after he and his wife, Mary — a Mainer — had their first child, Devlon.

"We have been visiting Mary's family here for many years and of course I fell in love with the place," Jones said. "So when Mary's mother died, there was the choice to sell her home or live in it. With a new baby, it wasn't that hard of a decision."

Show business is apparently in his blood. His mother was a singer and a high school drama teacher in Mississippi, where Robin was born, and later in Houston, Texas, which is where he began his performing career.

Later he knocked around San Francisco and Los Angeles acting, and directing — most notably the popular "Fake Radio" show, in Los Angeles, and doing stand-up comedy.

The last comes as no surprise, since stand-up is pretty much what Robin does when he isn't singing, dancing or otherwise playing the part of Mr. Peachum. While his antics have at times been distracting, he has also been hugely entertaining, with all of us wondering what on earth Robin is going to come up with next. It could be Jimmy Cagney as George M. Cohen, Ed Wynne as the laughing guy from "Mary Poppins," Jerry Lewis crying "oh la-deeeeeee!" or a host of other characters he's got down pat in his head and who are all eagerly awaiting to take over his personality at the slightest provocation. Jones is a sort of theatrical history Sybil. But he's all business when it comes to playing his "Threepenny" role and, like his off-stage persona, ones never knows exactly how he is going to play it — but we always know it's going to be great.

With a dynamic personality like his, one would think Robin Jones would overwhelm Annie Poole — an actor with far less stage experience who plays his wife. So much of the energy of this play hinges on the relationship between these two schemers, it would be unbalanced if the distaff was weak. Well it is not, she is not. Poole doesn't let down her side of the pairing for a moment, even when she's flat on her back with a whiskey bottle in her hand. Poole, who is an artist in her real life (she painted the handsome backdrop for this show) only started acting a few years ago, but she is one of those true naturals. Not only can she hold her own comedic ground with the pro playing her husband, she is the only player in this show who sustains a credible cockney accent, in both her song and her dialogue.

The other surprise is that she has not been singing all her life either. When we started rehearsing I really liked the emotional range of Poole's voice, which could switch from a sweet and fragile soprano in one moment to a deep, raspy, bawl the next. But I wondered about her ability to project. No problem. As soon Annie got familiar with her songs, (and over a case of laryngitis) she started upping the volume. Her "Sexual Dependency Song" is one of my favorite moments in the show.

In the three ingénue roles, Kateri Valliere as Polly, Saphrona Stetson as Lucy and Cait Powell as Jenny the Whore (not to be confused with Pirate Jenny) also dialed up their volume as they got more comfortable with their songs. Of the three, Kateri is the true



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actor. Her Polly is wonderfully petulant, tough and ultimately clueless as MacHeath's latest conquest. Her love scenes with MacHeath are convincingly steamy as she and Candage are a couple in real life, and there were a few of those steamy moments backstage as well.

Saphrona, who in her other life is a licensed commercial boat captain, isn't as strong an actor as Kateri but she does manage to sell her big solo number, the "Barbara Song," with her sweet, trilling soprano. The "Jealousy Duet," which she sings with Kateri, is also great fun and I constantly marveled at how, when she's all costumed and curled, she looks exactly like the Kate Greenway illustration of Lucy Lockett in my childhood "Mother Goose's Tales" nursery rhyme book.

As Jenny, the woman who finally betrays MacHeath, Powell — who is also responsible for the excellent period costuming in the show — may not be the strongest singer and actor in the cast, but she is so drop-dead gorgeous no one gives a darn. Every time she cinches herself into her corsets, I can't help wishing I had a tape measure, because I don't think her waist is any wider than Scarlet O'Hara's professed 16 inches. Her "Tango Ballad" with McHeath — a cross between a dance and domestic violence — is a dramatic highlight of the show.

When I moved from the concert version of "Threepenny" to the full production, I brought along two of my fellow Mount Desert Islanders - George Swanson, who in both versions played the Street Singer, and Cheri Magnello, who sang as Lucy in the concert and is the whore Molly, here.

It has been great watching Swanson stretch his acting range along with his expanded role. Each show night I am amazed by his strong voice, diction and dedication. In the grand finale he is supposed to stumble and fall on the stairs leading up to the stage, which he does with such force and conviction his whole front torso is bruised black and blue. While Magnello's speaking role is small in this show, her amazing voice is an absolute necessity, delivering a perfect high C over and over again. Best of all though I have enjoyed getting to know Magnello — a professional jeweler and co-owner of Island Artisans in Bar Harbor — while being chauffeured by her to the Town Hall Theater in her new car with, ahhhhh, heated seats.

I wish I had the space here to give a detailed account of each and every actor and the superb directors involved in this show, all whom epitomize everything that is wonderful about regional amateur theater. Musical director Abby Greene is a phenom. She somehow managed to turn a motley crew of amateur singers who started out tripping over such warm-up phrases as "mommy made me mash my M&Ms" into a cohesive musical ensemble handling with confidence the challenging Kurt Weill and Berthold Brecht score. The thing is, with her own powerful bluesy voice she could have stepped into any one of the female roles in this play.

As a sort of "good cop, bad cop" duo, John and Raiten were a hugely effective directorial team. John tends to let the actors work out their characters on their own with some gentle guidance, while Raiten has an opinion and direction to give about every line, and even the pauses between the lines. This can get disconcerting, even infuriating, but ultimately I found it gave us all an enormously colorful palette from which to choose as we molded our characters. The musical numbers he directed are some of the darkest, strangest things I have ever seen and the most inspired. A working see-saw, a spanking, a game of patty-cake, and some mass back stabbings are just a few of the elements he uses in this show.

As for me, well here are the best and the worst things that, thus far, have been said to me about my performance as Pirate Jenny.

After the show one night an attractive gentleman approached me and said: "If I appear to be wearing socks it is only an illusion, because you just knocked them off." Now that's about the nicest review I have ever gotten for anything I've done.

The worst thing said to me was the night of dress rehearsal. Keeping in mind that my character is essentially a bitter old hag, you can perhaps empathize with my dismay, when the lovely Cait Powell, who also did most of the show's make-up, after scrutinizing my face for a while earnestly said, "Ah, Nan, you don't need any make-up."

As Pirate Jenny would so eloquently put it. "Aaaargh!"

The New Surry Theatre production of "Threepenny Opera" has two final performances Friday and Saturday, April 9 and 10 at 7 p.m. There is some adult content. All shows are at the Blue Hill Town Hall. Tickets are available in advance at the Blue Hill Library, at the theater the night of the show at 6 p.m., by calling 374-5556

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