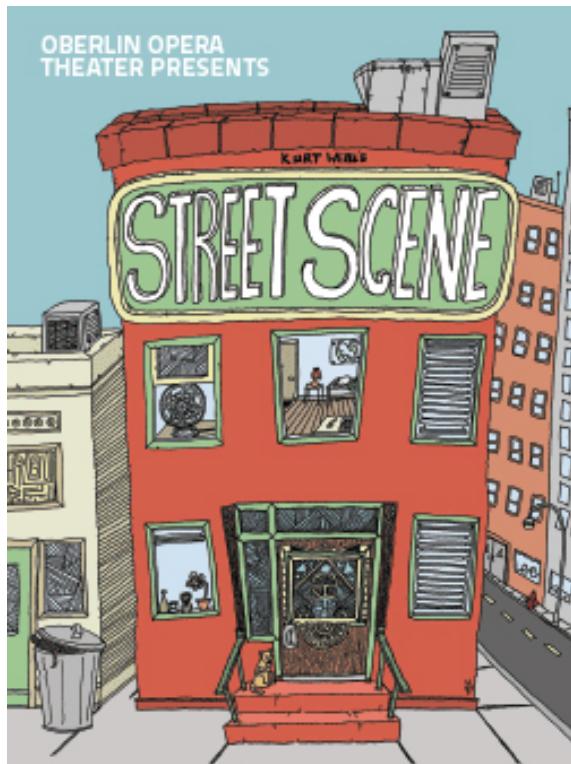


Oberlin Opera Theater's production of *Street Scene* inspires Weill Week events

by Mike Telin



German-American composer Kurt Weill had one foot in opera and the other on Broadway when he wrote *Street Scene* in 1946 with lyrics by Langston Hughes and book by Elmer Rice, based on Rice's play of the same name. Oberlin Opera Theater director Jonathon Field chose what Weill alternately called his "Broadway Opera" or his "American Opera" for their fall production.

Street Scene will open in Hall Auditorium on the Oberlin campus on Wednesday, November 5 with subsequent performances on Friday and Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoon. Unlike other Oberlin opera productions, the same cast will appear in all four shows.

The production of *Street Scene* has inspired several add-on events. A 1931 film of Elmer

Rice's play was shown last week at the Apollo Theatre, and lectures by Bruce D. McClung and Kim Kowalke and a Weill-Style Cabaret are also part of the schedule (see the Concert Listings for details.)

Jonathon Field spoke to Oberlin's Introduction to Music Criticism class last week about the production and took questions from the students and teaching panel (Mike Telin, Dan Hathaway and Donald Rosenberg). A digest of questions and answers follows.

*Q. What led you to choose *Street Scene*?*

A. There were several criteria, and the main one was the size of the cast — the fact that it afforded the students so many unique roles. And because Weill didn't write for a chorus, but for a group of individuals, even the smaller roles have personality. Every character has a history and a voice type.

The fact that it has dialogue also makes it a great training opera. So many times young performers don't get into the area of dialogue, so it provides a great learning experience for them. Street Scene is also very accessible.

Q. Have you directed Weill's works before?

A: I have, although I tend to lean toward his earlier works, which are a little edgier. This is more from his middle period. But I really am quite fond of it.



Q. Did the fact that Weill uses so many different musical genres in Street Scene factor into your decision to produce it?

A. In a way it did. Stylistically it runs the gamut from what you might call a grand opera with arias and ensemble singing, to dialogue and dialogue underscored with music, to almost a *recitativo* type of singing. It also goes from Broadway song and dance into something a little more serious. Also the musical diversity he used when orchestrating it is really quite wide and I think that helps make it interesting as well.

Q. What are the challenges of mounting the work?

A. The challenge for us is to decide what the piece wants to be, and then what we can do with it. What the piece wants to be is a slice of life on a real New York street, which means there are a variety of different accents like Italian and German. There's even a kind of New York Yiddish. Luckily there are many electronic resources to help with the practicing the accents. I also printed accent sheets for the cast. Another challenge is that the accents also need to be incorporated into the cast's singing voices.

Street Scene will be performed in English without supertitles. That creates a challenge for young singers because they need to project and enunciate. The show also requires a wide diversity of colors and people. Where we fall short as a company is that it needs a diversity of ages as well, from little kids up to 50- and 60-year olds.

In our production the characters who are supposed to be African American are Caucasian and people who are supposed to be Caucasian are often African American. In that regard it is more representative of a New York street today.

Because of the size of the cast, the biggest challenge was for me and the cast members to create a backstory for every character. You have forty to forty-five different plots that overlap and create a tapestry. In some cases the backstories have been provided by Kurt Weill and Langston Hughes.

Q. Is Street Scene a piece the stage director can take a lot of liberties with?

A. There are three levels of activity I have to direct: the onstage activity of the street, the activity that happens in the house, and the offstage activity. It's like Britten: if you stick to what is on the page, you will come up with a good production. It's very much like a play that is set to music, so you have to walk that fine line between a Broadway musical, a naturalistic play, and a full-out opera. And because these styles intermingle, I have to be consistently aware of which style Weill is using at the moment.

Q. Weill is a German composer, but do you think he captures American society of that time?

A. He really does, and what I think is interesting is that he puts that kind of realism in the score, like the sounds of car horns.

Q. How did Weill and Hughes get together?

A. The partnership of Weill and Hughes is an odd one, and I'm not quite sure what led to their collaboration. Of course I knew that Hughes was an excellent poet, but he's also an excellent writer and a great craftsman.

Q. Can we count on any special "Jonathon Field" surprises?

A. Oberlin College president Marvin Krislov and his wife will have a cameo walk-on appearance at the end.

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