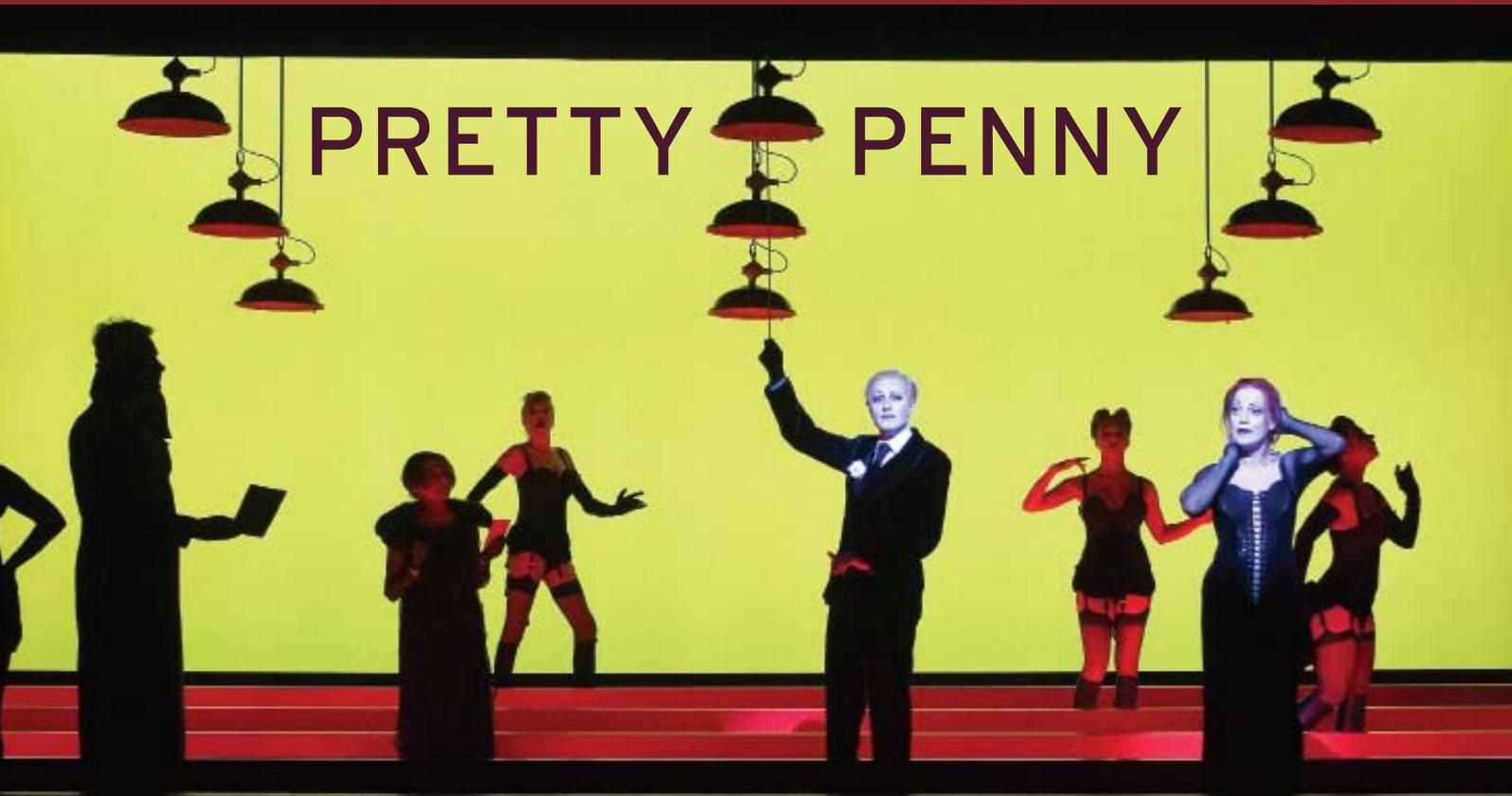


FRONT & CENTER

■ BROOKLYN, N.Y.



Stefan Kurt and Angela Winkler in Robert Wilson and the Berliner Ensemble's *Threepenny Opera*, coming to BAM's 2011 Next Wave Festival.

LESLEY LESLIE-SPINKS

Nothing comforts the have-nots quite like a satire of the haves. Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* has been thus diverting audiences since its triumphant 1928 debut, skewering the capitalist bourgeois of the Weimer Republic so soundly it was banned by the Reich. This month the Brecht-founded **Berliner Ensemble's** 2007 production, directed by Robert Wilson, makes a five-performance U.S. premiere at the **Brooklyn Academy of Music**, Oct. 4–8.

Pursued by presenting houses worldwide, Wilson's highly stylized interpretation has triumphed in every port. "The German ensemble's acting abilities, physicality and musicality provide an amazing impact in telling this particular story," says BAM executive director Joe Melillo, adding, "My own opinion is that Robert Wilson was destined to confront the superior ensemble work of the Berliner Ensemble and to wrestle with the material of *Threepenny Opera*."

In this posthumous meeting of the minds, Brecht and Wilson's theatrical visions reinforce each other. Six-time Wilson collaborator and *Threepenny* co-director Ann-Christin Rommen elaborates: "Brecht was for a formal, epic theatre with all the artistic elements equal to one another—much the way Bob works. Many critics have asserted that this is *Threepenny* as Brecht would have it." Bob, however, wasn't seeking Brecht-olytes' approval. Within the strictures of the Weill Foundation, which mandated absolute fidelity to the score, Wilson

describes reaching his finished product "intuitively" through his standard three stages of development: first at his Watermill Center in eastern Long Island, N.Y., where he creates a storyboard with drawings; second in a scriptless rehearsal period during which the actors master the story through movement; and third where the play is fitted to its text and design elements and recalibrated for a final time. Despite the substantial evolution, Rommen reveals, many of the early choices can be seen in the finished work.

The enduring worth of *Threepenny Opera* lies in the way Weill and Brecht were able to so stylishly infuse the bleakest material with darkly comedic relief, thanks to Weill's irreverent chart-topping score, Brecht's deadpan humor and the delightful insubordination of their anti-hero, Macheath, a.k.a. Mack the Knife. The famous Brechtian "alienation" effect, through which the playwright undermined facile emotionality, hammers his words into the cortex as well as the gut: "There are few things that stir men's souls, just a few, but the trouble is that after repeated use they lose their effect"—leaving you something to chew on that outlasts curtain call. Similarly, Wilson's visuals linger like afterimages. Anyone squeamish about a musical with numbers like "Song of the Insufficiency of Human Struggling" should rest assured: In the Madoff/Murdoch era, Mack is a lovable liar. —Cassandra Csencsitz