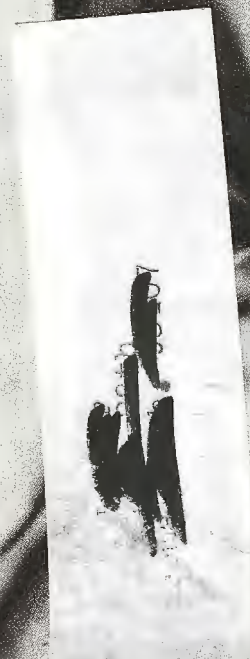


# AFTER DARK

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# "Lenya, whatever you do is epic enough for me!"—B. Brecht

An Interview with Lotte Lenya

by Neal Weaver



Above:  
Lotte Lenya as a teenage dancer in Zurich.

Opposite:  
Lotte Lenya and Kurt Weill at the time  
of their arrival in New York in 1935.

About once in a decade an artist appears who in some mysterious way seems to embody the very spirit of his time, place, and milieu. Some combination of qualities and attributes evolves which makes a single individual emerge almost as a metaphor for a moment in history, and therefore become a part of the permanent furniture of our minds. In the sixties, in the U.S. and England, it is perhaps the Beatles who are a symbol of where it's at, at least for the younger generation. In the fifties, Jack Kerouac, Marilyn Monroe, and James Dean caught a spirit recognizable to all. And a little before that there were Marlon Brando, and Elvis. F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway evoke memories of American expatriates and the Spanish Civil War. Maurice Chevalier, Josephine Baker, and Mistinguette are a quintessence of the naughty, glamorous oo-la-la world of Paris in the '20's, and Shakespeare distilled the special flavor of the whole Elizabethan age. And for many, the very sound of the rich, reedy voice of Lotte Lenya brings to vivid life the heady, chaotic, desperate, sophisticated atmosphere of Germany (and particularly Berlin) between the wars.

Describing Lenya is impossible. Dozens of people have tried, but at best they capture only one element of her fascination. Margot Asquith once described her voice as being that of "a disillusioned child singing outside a public house." And that's as good a beginning as any. It suggests the basic paradox which makes her performances memorable: she's shop-worn, but innocent; bitter, but somehow optimistic; expecting the worst, but never ceasing to hope; loving, but first and foremost, intent on survival, whatever the cost; cheery, even if a trifle desperate; and through it all, indomitable. She goes on, holding onto her sense of humor, and her basic honesty, come what may.

She summed it up very well, herself, in her comments about the role of Jenny in *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, a role created for her by Bertolt Brecht and her late husband Kurt Weill:

"One mistake they always seem to make with the part of Jenny. They play it like a whore, and she isn't. She fights for survival. This is her way of trying to survive. The more simply and honestly it's played, the better it is. The first duet with Jimmy Mahoney is enchanting and tender. She only wants to know what he expects of her. 'How should I wear my hair? How do you want me—*mit oder ohne Wasche*? With or without underwear?' She's like a child . . . And later, when he is about to be killed because of his debts, she's asked, 'Can't you pay

for him?' And she says, 'It's really fantastic what is required of a girl.' She says, simply and absolutely, that she won't."

It's an attitude that is common to most of the characters Lenya has played—and most of what Brecht has written: "We crave to be more kindly than we are" but "First feed the face, and then talk right and wrong." Even in her current Broadway hit, *Cabaret*, in which she plays the Berlin landlady who is romanced by a Jewish greengrocer, the attitude is the same: she's fond of Herr Schulz, but he is Jewish, and Hitler is on the rise, so she can't get caught on the losing side. (For Lenya herself, it's another story. In the dark days of 1933, she might have stayed on in Germany and pursued her highly successful career. She was not Jewish. But her husband, Kurt Weill, was, so she fled with him, just in time to escape the rising tide of Naziism. "Weill and Brecht were on the Black List. They, along with Hindemith, were accused of being Cultural Bolsheviks. We got out by the skin of our teeth.")

Lenya was born in Hitzing, a working class quarter of Vienna. Her mother was a laundress and her father was a coachman. Near their home was a small circus, where she made her debut at age 6, dancing the Czardas, and at eight, she was walking the tightrope. In 1914, at the beginning of World War I, she was sent to stay with an aunt in Zurich, Switzerland, and enrolled in the ballet classes at the Stadt-theatre,

"I was a ballerina first. Later, George Balanchine was so delighted to discover I could do all the things he showed me for *The Seven Deadly Sins* . . . But I hated it because it hurt to stand on my toes. I was very good at modern dance. And I studied the Jacques Dalcroze methods. I worked at the Stadt-theatre and the Schauspielhaus. Gradually they discovered I could also read lines, and I became a *Madchen fur alles*—all purpose girl.

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Top:  
Peter Lorre and Lotte Lenya in a production of Frank Wedekind's "The Awakening of Spring" in Berlin in 1929.

Bottom:  
Lotte Lenya in "Das Lied von Hoboken," an American play presented in Berlin, with a score (now lost) by Kurt Weill. Original title, "Song of Harlem," was mistranslated, with the result that when Lenya and Kurt Weill came to America, they made a ferry trip to Hoboken, looking for the Negro community.

a very idealistic director. We did nothing but Shakespeare, and I played every part possible for me to play.

"One day I saw an ad in a theatrical paper for auditions—at the same theatre where, eight years later, we would perform *Mahagonny*. They were seeing people for a children's ballet called *Zaubernacht* (The Magic Night), and wanted young actors who could sing and dance. The theatre was full of mothers and children. They asked me to sing a little song and to dance. Afterwards, someone said, 'Miss Lenya, meet our composer, Mr. Kurt Weill.' I only heard his voice. He was in the pit playing the piano. I never saw him at all. They asked me to do the piece, and told me to come back for the first rehearsal. But I was angry because they had refused to hire my drama teacher, so I never went back.

"My teacher introduced me to the playwright Georg Kaiser and his wife Margarethe. They liked me, and invited me to stay the summer at their place Grunheide (Green Meadows), about an hour from Berlin. One day, while I was living there, Kaiser said to me, 'Lenya, darling, tomorrow I expect a young composer for whom I've written a libretto for a one-act opera (*Der Protagonist*). Would you meet him at the station?' I said, 'Sure.' There were two ways to get to the station. One was a long walk through the woods, and the other was to take a row-boat across the lake. 'How will I recognize him?' I asked. 'All composers look alike,' he said. So I rowed across to the little station. There was sun on the waves. At the station I saw a very short young man with a typical musician's hat—the round kind—they don't wear them any more. Heavy thick glasses. A blue suit and a blue little tie. 'Are you Herr Weill?' I asked, and he said yes. I explained about the boat, and he said all right. I was rowing, and he was looking at me. He said, 'I think we've met,' and I said, 'Where?' And he said 'You didn't come back for the rehearsal of the ballet.' I said, 'Oh, yes,' and he said, 'I am the composer.'

"We lived together for two years, and then we were married until he died in 1950."

Weill had come to Berlin from Dessau, where his father was a Cantor, and already he, along with Paul Hindemith and Ernst Krenek, was regarded as one of the white hopes of German music. He was seeking for a new form of theatre music, which would combine serious musical forms with a more contemporary idiom, and his basic outlook was summed up in the statement, "I don't give a damn for posterity—I write for today!"

In 1927, Weill met Bertolt Brecht,

and a partnership began which was to affect both their lives—and Lenya's—profoundly. It was also to exert a lasting influence on the entire world theatre scene. Lenya describes her first meeting with Brecht:

"It was in the spring of 1927, and Kurt had just finished setting to music the five *Mahagonny Songs* from Brecht's book of poems, *Hauspostille*. Now Brecht had linked the songs with a narrative into a completely new kind of song-sketch, and the work was to be performed at the Baden-Baden Kammermusik Festival that summer. Kurt had written the *Alabama-Song* for my completely untrained voice—I couldn't read music, and still can't—and insisted that I must sing it in Baden-Baden. So this was to be my audition for Brecht, also my first meeting with him . . . Kurt brought Brecht in. He had already adopted what was to be a life-long uniform, the 'B.B.' style—leather cap, jacket and tie, close-cropped hair, stubble on his chin, a stogie stuck in the corner of his thin mouth—slavishly copied by his disciples. I sang the *Alabama-Song* and he listened with that deep courtesy and patience that I was to learn never failed him with women and actors. 'Not quite so Egyptian,' he said, turning my palms upward, extending my arm outward in direct appeal to the moon of Alabama. 'Now let's really work . . .'

"At the Baden-Baden Festival, our little *Mahagonny* was preceded and followed by performances of the most austere forms of modern chamber music, mostly atonal. But that sophisticated, international audience stared in bewilderment when the stage hands began to set up a boxing ring on the stage. The buzz increased as the singers, dressed as the worst hoodlums and frails, climbed through the ropes, a giant Casper Neher projection flashed on the screen behind the ring, and *Mahagonny* began—with a real, an unmistakeable tune! It was an illustrious crowd, full of the leading lights of modern music, and in this atmosphere, *Mahagonny* exploded like an atom bomb. The demonstrations started as we were singing the last song, and waving placards—mine said, FOR WEILL—with the whole audience on its feet cheering and booing and whistling. One man was seen applauding and booing at the same time . . . Brecht had thoughtfully provided us with whistles of our own, little *trillerpfeifen*, so we stood there whistling defiantly back. Later, I walked into the lobby of the fashionable hotel where most of the audience went for drinks after the performance, and found a frenzied discussion in



Above:  
Lotte Lenya as Jenny Diver in the original  
production of "The Threepenny Opera"  
in Berlin in 1928.

At Left:  
Lenya as Jenny in G.W. Pabst's film version  
of "The Threepenny Opera."



progress. Suddenly I felt a slap on the back, accompanied by a booming laugh: 'Is here no telephone?' It was Otto Klemperer. With that, the whole room was singing the *Benares-Song*, and I knew the battle was won." (Note: "Is here no telephone?" is a line from Brecht's pidgin English lyrics for the *Benares-Song*.)

Weill and Brecht returned to Berlin full of plans for an expanded, full length *Mahagonny*—but Brecht was a man of many projects, and one idea he had in hand was an adaptation of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*.

At a restaurant called "Schlichter," which was a Bohemian mecca in the Berlin of the 1920's, he met a young theatrical producer named Ernst Josef Aufricht, and told him some of his ideas for *The Beggar's Opera*. Aufricht was fascinated with the possibilities of the work, and decided to open his new Theater am Schiffbauerdamm with it. He was less fascinated by the prospect of Kurt Weill, composer of atonal operas, providing the score.

"Aufricht asked the conductor who had been engaged to keep the old *Beggar's Opera* music ready as a substitute. But when Weill played and sang his music, all doubts vanished. The Brecht-Weill team had been created, and *The Beggar's Opera* became *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*).

"From the beginning of rehearsals until the first performance of *Threepenny Opera*, there was a chain of catastrophes. Carola Neher, who had been engaged for the part of Polly, one week before opening threw the manuscript at Aufricht's feet and told him: 'Play that trash yourself.' Rosa Valetti, the beloved Berlin cabaret star, had so little confidence in the play that she let her husband sign a contract with the Kabarett der Komiker, which began one day after the opening of *Threepenny*. Erich Ponto, who played Mr. Peachum, wanted to pack his suitcases the day of the opening because a part of one of his important scenes had to be cut since the play was too long. Helene Weigel, Brecht's wife, suffered an attack of appendicitis and could not go through with her part. The dress rehearsal, one day before opening, lasted until 6 in the morning. Up to the last minute, we didn't have a quiet moment, and the stage hands were still busy with work when the audience gathered in the auditorium. After the curtain finally went up, there was an icy silence during the first scene. Then came the *Kanonensong* (*The Army Song* in Marc Blitzstein's English translation), and thunderous applause resounded. From then on, there was success . . . Kurt had discovered

that by some kind of negligence, my name did not appear in the program. During his entire career in the theatre, this was the first and only time Kurt completely lost his temper. He was raging. He didn't want me to go on. I promised him that nothing would keep me from going ahead with the performance. Program or no program. I told him, 'They'll know who I am tomorrow.'

"Despite all this, the *Threepenny* opening became a legendary success. Berlin became infected with *Threepenny* fever. Everywhere, even in the streets, its melodies were being whistled. A Threepenny Bar opened in which no other music was played. The 'Brecht-Weill Style,' or whatever they meant by that, began to be copied."

In *The Threepenny Opera*, Lenya played Jenny Diver, a wistfully treacherous little whore who betrays her lover, MacHeath, to the police. In a blood-curdling scene, she danced the tango with him, and backed him into the arms of the waiting police. She introduced a little farewell gesture, a sort of flick of her hand at the forehead, and then into the air, ending with a snap of the fingers. The gesture became a symbol throughout Germany of the betrayal of a friend, and was repeated in the streets even by children at play.

And the role of Jenny, created by Lenya, became a nostalgic signature note for Brecht and Weill, and like Gilbert and Sullivan, whose success with *Pirates of Penzance* led them to a predilection for titles with P's in them, Weill introduced the name of Jenny into three of his other works: it was the name given to the little prostitute Lenya was to play in the full-length *Mahagonny*, to a character in his American folk opera *Down in the Valley*, and to the decisive lady sung about by Gertrude Lawrence (*Jenny Made Her Mind Up*) in *Lady in the Dark*.

The success of *Threepenny* also gave Brecht and Weill the freedom to complete the final version of *Mahagonny*: *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (*The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*), a play which seems eerily contemporary today, with its city where the only crime is to be short of cash, and its finale of militant, placard-bearing protest marchers, marching and singing against the background of the city in flames.

"Recently a friend who remembers that period vividly said to me: 'I wonder if all the critics who are writing such solemn studies of *Dreigroschenoper* and *Mahagonny* have any idea of what fun it all was then!' The opera *Mahagonny* had its first performance

in Leipzig in March 1930, with a cast of opera singers—and a coloratura from the Staatsoper played Jenny. It set off what has been called the worst theatre riot in history. It was the same house that had seen the wildly successful premiere of Krenek's *Jonny spielt Auf* a few years earlier, but the political climate of Germany had been steadily darkening since then. I have been told that the square around the opera house had been full of Nazi Brownshirts, carrying placards protesting the performance. But I had come to Leipzig that day, and I could see, hear, think of nothing but *Mahagonny*. Kurt's parents and I were in our seats, and the performance well under way before I was startled out of my absorption by the electric tension around us, something strange and ugly.

"As the opera swept toward its close, the demonstrations started, whistles and boos; by the time the last scene was reached, fist fights had broken out in the aisles, the theatre was a screaming mass of people; soon the riot had spread to the stage, panicky spectators were trying to claw their way out, and only the arrival of a large police force, finally, cleared the theatre. The next day, the city council of Leipzig held a special meeting, to consider cancelling all further performances of *Mahagonny*. It was finally decided not to impose hasty censorship measures, but the second performance was played with the house lights on and police lining the walls of the theatre.

"Many other German opera houses hastily dropped *Mahagonny* from their announced plans, while the critical clamor continued. Some critics courageously declared the work to be the first *Zeitoper*—the first opera to mirror the spirit of our times—while others saw it as a distorted expression of the desperation of all German intellectuals. It was not until December, 1931, that Berlin heard the work, produced at the Kurfürstendamm Theatre by Ernst Josef Aufricht. Here again was a revolutionary first for Kurt: the first opera in history to be presented for a continuous run in a commercial theatre.

"Time was running out for Germany, but there still remained in Berlin what I am certain was the most acutely aware, the most perceptive theatre public that has ever existed. Aufricht had taken over the theatre from Max Reinhardt, just for *Mahagonny* . . . and boldly assembled a production so lavish in its simplicity, and the perfection of its high-powered cast, that there could never be any question of profit. It was a fantastic labor of love for this great avant-garde

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Lotte Lenya as a teenage dancer in Zurich.

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Lotte Lenya and Kurt Weill at the time  
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She summed it up very well, herself, in her comments about the role of Jenny in *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, a role created for her by Bertolt Brecht and her late husband Kurt Weill:

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It's an attitude that is common to most of the characters Lenya has played—and most of what Brecht has written: "We crave to be more kindly than we are" but "First feed the face, and then talk right and wrong." Even in her current Broadway hit, *Cabaret*, in which she plays the Berlin landlady who is romanced by a Jewish greengrocer, the attitude is the same: she's fond of Herr Schulz, but he is Jewish, and Hitler is on the rise, so she can't get caught on the losing side. (For Lenya herself, it's another story. In the dark days of 1933, she, might have stayed on in Germany and pursued her highly successful career. She was not Jewish. But her husband, Kurt Weill, was, so she fled with him, just in time to escape the rising tide of Naziism. "Weill and Brecht were on the Black List. They, along with Hindemith, were accused of being Cultural Bolsheviks. We got out by the skin of our teeth.")

Lenya was born in Hitzing, a working class quarter of Vienna. Her mother was a laundress and her father was a coachman. Near their home was a small circus, where she made her debut at age 6, dancing the Czardas, and at eight, she was walking the tightrope. In 1914, at the beginning of World War I, she was sent to stay with an aunt in Zurich, Switzerland, and enrolled in the ballet classes at the Stadt-theatre.

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Above:  
Lotte Lenya and Earl Wrightson in the Kurt Weill-Ira Gershwin musical "The Firebrand of Florence," produced on Broadway in 1945.



Right:  
Lotte Lenya and Tilly Losch in the original production of "Seven Deadly Sins" in Paris in 1933. Kurt Weill wrote the music, Brecht provided the text, and George Balanchine was the choreographer.

Below:  
Lotte Lenya (seen here with Larry Kert) as the Berlin Landlady, Fraulein Schneider in the Broadway hit musical, "Cabaret."



producer, and fervently appreciated by all who saw it."

In the Berlin production, opera singers were not employed. Singing actors were recruited from musical comedy and operetta, and Lenya was restored to her original role as Jenny.

"It was written for me, so I had no problems. There was no noise from the audience. It was just accepted. It ran for 60 performances."

(Note: There have been many attempts to get *Mahagonny* on the stage in the U.S., and workshop productions have been done in various places, including one at The Actors Studio, in New York. At one time Elia Kazan and Lenya discussed a production to be done at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre, but it came to naught. Among the problems, Brecht's son created considerable difficulty over production rights. Producer Carmen Capalbo, who was co-producer of the Off Broadway production of *The Threepenny Opera*, has, after a three year battle to straighten out the rights and get a contract, scheduled a production for next season. Lenya will serve only as an advisor, and actresses who have been mentioned as candidates for the plum role of Jenny have ranged from Dionne Warwick to Estelle Parsons to Cher Bono (of Sonny and Cher). (The opera is available, in German, on an album by Columbia Records, with Lenya singing Jenny.)

Political tensions continued to rise in Germany, with Nazi rallies and demonstrations becoming a permanent and pervasive part of the German scene. A break occurred between Brecht and Weill, with the result that Weill joined forces once again with Georg Kaiser on *Der Silbersee* (*The Silver Lake*). The score included a politically daring song called *The Ballad of Caesar's Death* which used Roman history to veil an attack on Hitler and his ruthless drive for power. The work opened simultaneously in eleven German cities, producing Nazi demonstrations in most of them, and was closed by official edict the next day.

"Friends had warned us that it was high time to get out of Germany. Head over heels we packed our suitcases and escaped to Paris. Brecht, too, had come to Paris, and he and Kurt resumed their collaboration. They created *The Seven Deadly Sins*, in which I performed the role of Anna in its first performance, choreographed by George Balanchine."

Paris and London had already seen the G. W. Pabst film version of *Dreigroschenoper*, which paved the way for concert versions of the Weill



works, starring Lenya. Virgil Thomson wrote in 1933: "The Weill songs have a perfection of prosody unequalled by any other European composer. Without degenerating into mere *sprechstimme*, keeping at all times the formal contour of a popular song, there is a union of words that, once made, is indissoluble . . . Madame Lenya sings, or rather croons, with an impeccable diction that reaches the furthest corners of any hall and with an intensity of dramatization and sincerity of will that are very moving. She is, moreover, beautiful in a way that nobody has vulgarized so far . . ."

Says Lenya: "A lot of the emigres had a hard time, but it was not so hard for us. We met Max Reinhardt in Paris, and he invited Kurt to the U.S. to compose the score for his spectacular Biblical play *The Eternal Road*, and I appeared in it as Moses' sister, and as the Witch of Endor."

Once in the U.S., Weill turned all his attention to the American musical theatre. He wrote the score for Paul Green's *Johnny Johnson*, an anti-war play produced by the Group Theatre, and with Maxwell Anderson, *Knickerbocker Holiday*, in which Walter Huston sang the beloved *September Song*. ("Prestige successes! You can starve on them!")

(I mentioned to Lenya that the recording of Weill singing his own *September Song* (Tryout, Heritage Records) was a startling experience because he sounded uncannily like Lenya herself. She smiled and said, "Of course. Where do you think I learned it from?")

Playwright Maxwell Anderson became a fast friend of the Weills, and Lenya was cast in one of his plays, *Candle in the Wind*, with Helen Hayes. "We toured as far as Memphis and I learned part of America. Helen Hayes loved zoos. We had to go to every zoo. Not that she forced the issue. I like zoos, too."

There was also an ill-fated musical, *The Firebrand of Florence*, based on a play about Benvenuto Cellini by Edwin Justus Mayer, for which Weill provided the score and in which Lenya starred, with Earl Wrightson.

And there were lighter moments, as in Lenya's struggle to master English syntax and pronunciation. Shortly after she arrived in the U.S. she went on a shopping expedition on Fifth Avenue. In one shop, she selected her purchase, handed it to the clerk, and said with a smile, "Will you rape it for me, please?"

"Finally I decided to just not do anything in the theatre. It was too complicated. Kurt was fighting for his existence. It was easier for him if I quit. I didn't mind.

"The summer they wrote *Knickerbocker Holiday*, we rented a summer house from Maxwell Anderson. Rollo Peters, the actor who played Romeo to Jane Cowl's Juliet, had a house near by. We saw it and loved it. We said, 'If you sell this house, let us know and we might be able to buy it.' 'This house I'll never sell,' he said.

"Kurt finally made a smash success with *Lady in the Dark*, in collaboration with Ira Gershwin and Moss Hart (Note: The Gershwin-Weill collaboration continued for a movie called *Where Do We Go From Here?*, starring Fred MacMurray, Joan Leslie, and June Haver, which had one of the most sophisticated scores ever created for a film musical. The songs are available, also on Heritage Records' *Tryout*, sung by Gershwin and Weill.) Rollo Peters suddenly called and said, 'Lenya, are you still interested in the house? You can have it. I'm selling it.' Two or three days later we bought the house, where I'm still living.

"Brecht, while he was in the U.S., visited us and worked for a week in our guest room. This might amuse you. The room we gave to Brecht was very nicely furnished, with curtains and a rug. I showed him to his room. Five minutes later I came back with towels and soap. The curtains were down. The rug was rolled up. He had put up a red star on a string and the Chinese scroll he carried with him all over the world. He tried exactly to recreate his Berlin studio, in five minutes. I looked around and said, 'I'm right back in Berlin.' "

In their new house on the Hudson, Weill continued to write scores for the theatre: *One Touch of Venus*, and *Street Scene*, based on Elmer Rice's play, and his final collaboration with Maxwell Anderson, *Lost in the Stars*, a powerful music drama based on Alan Paton's novel of Africa, *Cry, the Beloved Country*. In 1950, shortly after the opening of *Lost in the Stars*, Weill suddenly died, leaving Lenya bereft.

"Kurt wrote a lot in America. But his sudden and unexpected death put an end to it all. I never wanted to be on the stage again or appear in public anywhere."

Maxwell Anderson persuaded her to return to the stage in a role he had created for her, Xantippe, wife of Socrates, in his play *Barefoot in Athens*. After a short run, she once again retreated into retirement.

"Again, it was Ernst Josef Aufricht who pleaded with me to return to the stage. I agreed to appear in a concert performance of *Threepenny Opera*, which he sponsored, the success of which led to the stage production off-Broadway at the Theatre de Lys. This production became one of the

biggest hits of New York Theatre History.

"In 1955, I went back to Berlin for the first time since 1933, with my second husband, George Davis, who was the editor of *Harper's Bazaar*. We talked about the Berlin songs Kurt had written with Brecht and Georg Kaiser, George wanted me to record them. I thought, who would be interested or care about those songs now? What I didn't know was that he'd already spoken to Columbia Records about the project, and had the music in his suitcase. When we got there, he said, 'Make this record here.' It was finally made in Hamburg. But I couldn't decide to do it right away. I said, 'First I must ask Brecht.'

"I had no idea what would happen if I crossed into East Berlin. I thought I'd wind up in Siberia. I put a kerchief on my head, like a hausfrau, and carried a sandwich in a paper bag. It was just a short trip on the Stadtbahn. I called Brecht's house. Weigel's unmistakable voice said, 'Where are you? Come over and have some coffee.' Brecht was asleep when I got there. She said he would be down in a minute for a meeting. 'Let's surprise him.' A few minutes later Brecht came in. He just looked at me—and blushed. No one knew Brecht could blush. He said, 'Ja, wie so, denn?' and I said, 'Darum.' Weigel left. I told him about the record album. He said, 'Lenya, I can't remember. Some of those things I've forgotten. Come again and sing them for me.' I made an appointment and came back. He looked very tired and sat in an Italian chair with a high back. I'll never forget that picture. The workman's cap pulled down over his face. I sang *Surabaya Johnny* first. There was no piano. I just sang. In the middle of the song, I remembered his theories about Epic Theatre. It was 25 years since I'd sung for him. Maybe my style had changed. When I finished the song, I said, 'Well, Brecht, maybe you don't agree any more with the way I sing. It's not epic theatre.'

"Brecht was very shy about expressing feeling—but something happened then that I'd never experienced before. He patted me on my cheek, and said, 'Lenya, whatever you do is epic enough for me.' I wish there were witnesses for that statement . . . Then I sang him the *Ballad of the Drowned Maiden*, and he said, 'I can't remember that at all . . . It's beautiful. Do this album. It's great.' I got up to leave, but I knew he had something on his mind. With the doorknob in his hand, he said, 'Just a minute, Lenya. I want to ask you something. Record the *Ballad* for our archives, to show the students how it





**Top:**  
Vivien Leigh, Warren Beatty, and Lotte Lenya in the Warner Bros. film version of Tennessee Williams' "The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone," in which Lenya played a wily procuress.

**Center:**  
Lotte Lenya sings "The Bilbao Song" in a documentary produced for German TV, "Lotte Lenya Sings Kurt Weill."

**Bottom:**  
Omar Sharif and Lotte Lenya in the forthcoming MGM film, "The Appointment."

should be sung . . . ' It frightened me a little. I said, 'Listen, I'm doing this in the East Zone. It could cost me my American passport, and I don't want to lose it. And I'm making this album for Columbia. Promise me you won't publicize it, and I'll do it.'

"We made a date. That was Thursday. He said to come on Saturday. We recorded at the Schiffbauerdamm Theatre, where the Berliner Ensemble had its headquarters. It was where we'd played *Threepenny*. In the first boxes there were an accordion and piano. The asbestos fire curtain was down. Behind the asbestos they were packing for their Paris Gastspiel, and it was very noisy. Brecht pounded on the asbestos and—he could really scream—yelled, 'Ruhe! Ruhe! I'm doing something that will last longer than what you do there.' I laughed and said to him, 'Face it, Brecht, you are behind the iron curtain.' We finished the recording and I left. I never saw him again. When I arrived in Hamburg again, much later, to record *The Seven Deadly Sins*, in the first newspaper I saw there were two headlines side by side: 'Lotte Lenya arrives in Hamburg'/'Bertolt Brecht died last night.' "

Following the success of the off Broadway production of *The Threepenny Opera*, and the Columbia album of the *Berlin Songs*, Lenya began a whole new career. She has made records (*Threepenny Opera* and *Johnny Johnson* for MGM, and recordings of *Seven Deadly Sins*, *Threepenny Opera* and *Mahagonny* for Columbia, and most recently a still to be released single record), and appeared in films (she was a wily procuress in *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, with Warren Beatty and Vivien Leigh; a lethal lady spy in the James Bond epic *From Russia With Love*, and she is a madam once again in MGM's forthcoming *The Appointment*, with Omar Shariff and Anouk Aimee).

She's been on Broadway (and on record) in *Cabaret*, based on Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*. She sang *Seven Deadly Sins* at the Frankfurt Opera, and played Brecht's *Mutter Courage* at Germany's Recklinghausen Festival. She's recently received invitations from Germany and Austria to repeat her role in *Cabaret* there.

She is currently married to American painter Russell Detweiler, and still occupying her beloved house on the Hudson in New City, New York. Her most recent undertaking was a color documentary for German television called *Lotte Lenya Sings Kurt Weill*, produced and directed by Vincent Scarza, in which she performs four of the songs she has made beloved around the world: *Pirate*

*Jenny, Surabaya Johnny, The Ballad of Caesar*, and the rollicking *Bilbao-Song*. Although an English language version was made, it has not yet been shown on American television, but at recent screenings for invited audiences, there was hardly a dry eye in the house. Lenya came together again with those marvellous songs and she—and they—were transfigured. I said to her afterwards, "That was marvellous. Now I know what you were like when you were sixteen." "Thank you for a lovely compliment," she said. But it was no compliment. Just simple truth. Lotte Lenya is still younger and more beautiful than anybody.

**Opposite Page:**  
Lotte Lenya as Brecht's "Mother Courage," at Germany's Recklinghausen Festival in 1965.



