

EVENTS & EXHIBITIONS

"If you want to do something, you find a way" – Free Theatre's Marian McCurdy on 'The Deadbeat Opera'

Theatre



Following on from last year's successful production on 'Woyzeck', the Free Theatre returns in September to The

Pumphouse for its new offering, 'The Deadbeat Opera'.

The Deadbeat Opera is Free Theatre's adaptation of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) a revolutionary and then immensely popular 'anti-opera' and forerunner to the modern-day musical where criminal gang leaders and prostitutes sung well known songs (by Johann Pepusch) and folk ballads about corruption, poverty and injustice; and Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) an adaptation 200 years later of Gay's work with new music

in the form of cabaret songs composed by Kurt Weill.

We spoke to production manager Marian McCurdy about what audiences can expect.

Is The Deadbeat Opera a kind of follow up to Woyzeck?

It is really, it's following on from that success. We had a sold-out season of Woyzeck which we weren't necessarily expecting for a musical that was all about misery, so really it was about getting together again with the cast and the musicians and creating another project on the back of that.

You've adapted it from two sources? The Beggars Opera and The Threepenny Opera? Is it kind of an amalgamation of both?

It's a collage of both works and in addition to that we're bringing in contemporary material as well.

What's the process of that?

We actually started developing the opera last year. We had a series of cabarets – Beggar's Banquet and Babylon Berlin, where we explored material from both works. We staged these at The Pumphouse where we also performed Woyzeck, so we've been developing a relationship with the venue and exploring its possibilities too. That's how we generally like to work; developing projects over a longer period of time with a group of artists so that everyone can contribute ideas and thoughts and different perspectives on the material and then we piece together a structure, we make choices around music and link it all together into an experience for the audience that works. Brecht's Threepenny Opera was originally an adaptation of The Beggars Opera so in a way we're following a tradition of adapting this story.

So it turns full circle?

I think the reason for doing it this way is perhaps the thing we have in common with those previous works is, the fact that they were both made at a time when society was really in crisis. There was immense poverty, homelessness and a lot of problems and obviously that's something in our current society that we can relate to.

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It's interesting that these themes haven't really gone away.

No, it might even be getting worse, because now the environmental impacts are coming into play. I guess for us as a theatre company, art is a place where you can really confront these things. What these works share is that they have a lot of comedy in them, even though they're dealing with hard-hitting, quite brutal material but there are very satirical songs and the music itself is really fun.

Are the same performers taking part this year?

It's essentially the same ensemble, yeah. There are a few changes, but in essence it really is a follow up to *Woyzeck*, so Hester Ulliyart is playing the central male character of Macheath, similar to how she played *Woyzeck*.

You said before you were surprised at the success of *Woyzeck* last year, why were you surprised at it?

Because I suppose most musicals are meant to be uplifting and this was such a dark story – it ended with a murder. There was no redeeming moment where things are resolved and get better, it just ends like that. So it's kind of a surprise that people want to go to the theatre and see such a depressing story.

They seem to. Look at how popular crime stories are!

We do seem to have a fascination with crime. I guess there could be few different reasons for that. But in a way, I guess to feel hopeful, you do have to acknowledge the darker sides of the human experience and sometimes I feel like our audiences find it a bit of a relief to acknowledge that society can be pretty shitty sometimes. It allows you to not feel alone, it reminds you that you're part of a community that also feels the same way about those things and I guess it's also about just having some fun together and making the darkness a little bit lighter and so *Woyzeck* did seem to tap into a desire for that.

Did performing it at The Pump House also give it an interesting feel?

I think staging it there was a part of the success. The cabarets were all sold out as well. It's a great venue for us, it's not a conventional theatre space but it works really well.

Did you find that with Woyzeck you had a lot of people attend who perhaps hadn't seen Free Theatre before?

We did. That was really great for us. Obviously as an avant garde theatre you can feel a bit marginalised but this production was really popular and we found a lot of people came who hadn't been to one of our performances before. So hopefully this one will strike the same chord.

Have you found that audiences increase and decrease depending on what's happening in society? I'm just thinking about how works like this, that reflect the hardships of society, might be really popular at certain times and then other times people just want froth and frivolity...

That's a good question. I find it hard to know because all of our projects look so different. Obviously everything we've done at The Pumphouse has explored a theme and we often do that – present several different projects that are all connected. But other things have been so different at other venues, that you're never really sure what the factor is. I think the main thing is not to judge the value of what you're doing on ticket sales. If you did that, you'd just end up doing things that you hope would be the most popular and probably lose your will to live, or at least to create art!

With Woyzeck the stage itself was part of the venue and felt quite informal – is it the same kind of set up for The Deadbeat Opera?

For Woyzeck we had the stage running through the audience – for this project it will be more traditionally proscenium with a stage at one end and the audience sitting in rows so it will be more conventional that way. As usual the performers are running the venue, taking tickets, operating the bar, seating audiences etc.

It's original music as well?

The musicians are doing their own versions of songs and adapting the music for our own purposes. Tom Waits composed all the music for Woyzeck and we have a Tom Waits song in this work too, he wrote an album that was all about the issues we're exploring so that really fitted what we were doing. Patti Smith is in there.

You've dedicated the show to Samantha Boyce De Cruz who passed away earlier this year? She helped develop the work?

She did. She was part of the cabarets where we worked on the material, so it was devastating. She actually died just before we were about to go into rehearsal so we had to shift the project six months which is why we are doing it now. Her death was devastating for us. One of the reasons we've really pushed to keep the show going is to honour her. She would have loved it. Her brother, Aaron, is performing in the show – and actually, she's on the show poster standing next to her brother, so it's really nice to have her there.

It sounds like it's been a challenging year for you

It always is! We're very persistent, I'd say. We do a lot with very little. If you want to do something, you find a way – all artists will understand that. It's very easy to give up but if you have a reason to do something, and you feel it's important and you feel like other people might care about it too, then it's worth it.

Now your ticket prices seem very reasonable for this production.

At the moment it is hard for people to go out because there's not that spare money to buy things like theatre tickets so for us it was important to keep our ticket prices as low as possible – significantly lower than what you'd usually pay to see a professional theatre show.

That obviously affects your bottom line?

It's much more important to us that we make artwork that's accessible rather than just trying to make money. That's why our artists are often as poor as beggars!

The Deadbeat Opera is on at The Pumphouse 6-21 September.

Tickets available now at [Free Theatre website here.](#)