Alf Sjöberg's *Miss Julie* (1951) and G. W. Pabst's *The Threepenny Opera* (1931): Films worth noting … and seeing

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23 June 2016

Miss Julie, *directed by Alf Sjöberg, based on the play by August Strindberg*; The Threepenny Opera, *directed by G. W. Pabst, screenplay by Béla Balázs, Léo Lania and Ladislaus Vajda, loosely based on the Bertolt Brecht/Kurt Weill theatrical production*

In the midst of a flood of mostly, bland, noisy and puerile summer film releases, it seems appropriate to point out that there was a time when filmmaking took the world and art seriously. Moreover, such movies had a significant audience.

Two remarkable films that are readily available—*Miss Julie* (1951) and *The Threepenny Opera* (1931)—still retain their beauty, texture and provocative quality.

Miss Julie

Miss Julie, from Swedish filmmaker and veteran theater director Alf Sjöberg (1903-1980), is based on the play by August Strindberg (1849-1912). Written in 1888, the drama was banned or censored throughout Europe for what was considered its socially subversive and sexually charged content.

The play and film take place on the Swedish country estate owned by a nobleman simply known as "The Count." The movie's opening sequences are some of its best and most lively. It is Midsummer's Eve and the estate's farm-hands and domestics are raucously and a little drunkenly celebrating the holiday with maypole and barn dancing.

The count's daughter, Miss Julie (Anita Björk), is a high-spirited young woman more attracted to the rough and tumble servants than her upper class suitors, whom she wants to bend to her will (I will "make him my slave," she says of her fiancé). She and Jean (Ulf Palme), her father's valet, begin an encounter that will end tragically for Julie.

Sjöberg's black-and white film is faithful to Strindberg's play, with the added element that it dramatizes the characters' dreams and memories, imparting the strong and pervasive sense that their past lives weigh heavily on their present unhappy circumstances. Frustrated and at times incoherent, they are caged inside an inflexible social order.

Björk is the quintessential Julie in all her beauty, storminess and, at times, child-like vulnerability. Hers is a masterful performance. Palme as Jean and Märta Dorff as Kristin the cook (Strindberg: "She is a female slave, obsequious and dull," who respects her betters) are also impressive.

Strindberg, profoundly influenced by the 1871 Paris Commune and the labor struggles of the 1880s, chose to emphasize the class issues in *Miss Julie*. Jean: "Oh, Miss Julie—a dog can lie on her ladyship's sofa, a horse can have his nose stroked by a young lady's hand, but a servant … but you stood for the utter hopelessness of ever rising out of the class where I was born" Further—Julie: "It must be a dreadful misfortune to be poor." The central characters twist and turn, torment each other and themselves throughout, but cannot escape their social roles, which hold them as tightly as chains.

The dialogue among the estate's workers (one of whom is a youthful Max von Sydow!), the scene of Jean and Julie escaping by rowboat, the small details of daily life—in fact, many sequences—are beautifully and precisely directed by Sjöberg, who was a First Director of Sweden's Royal Dramatic Theatre from 1930-1980. His film work was limited, but he is credited with the direction of at least one more remarkable performance, Eva Dahlbeck (best known later for her roles in several films by Ingmar Bergman) in *Only a Mother* (1949).

The film's—and the play's—major flaw is the somewhat artificial and arbitrary grafting of a battle between the sexes onto the dominant and concretely portrayed class war. In fact, as Strindberg remarked in his preface: "The problem of social rise or downfall, of who is higher or lower, or who is better or worse, whether man or woman, is, has been and shall be of enduring interest."

For Strindberg, in other words, the war between the classes and antagonisms between the sexes were on an equal footing, and this false notion makes the interplay between Julie—with her supposedly inherited mistrust of men—and Jean at times unconvincing and strained.

In the movie, this weakness emerges most prominently in the flashbacks of Julie's mother (Lissi Alandh), half-"modern woman," who rejected marriage and submissiveness, and half "man-hater." (Strindberg had several turbulent and unsuccessful marriages and relationships.) The scenes in which Julie's mother appears reveal Strindberg's deeply ambivalent and confused attitude, with its suggestions of Nietzscheanism, toward a certain independent female type, and tend to detract from the drama's precise focus on social life.

In any event, Sjöberg tackled Strindberg with an uncommon artistry. The filmmaker tapped into the spirit of the playwright, who in 1880 revealed his explosive radicalism: "I am a socialist, a nihilist, a republican, anything that is anti-reactionary! … I want to turn everything upside down to see what lies beneath; I believe we are so

webbed, so horribly regimented, that no spring-cleaning is possible, everything must be burned, blown to bits, and then we can start afresh."

The Threepenny Opera

Austrian filmmaker G. W. Pabst's (1885-1967) film *The Threepenny Opera* is an intricate, intriguing movie, loosely based on the Bertolt Brecht-Kurt Weill piece of musical theater, which was a huge success when it opened in Berlin in 1928. (That work itself was based on John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, 1728)

An essay accompanying the Criterion Collection version of *The Threepenny Opera* observes that the theatrical show "was a sensational hit from its opening night; within a year there had been forty-two hundred performances in theaters all across Europe. …

"Weill's score was obviously a major factor in this success, with its inspired magpie blend of elements from American jazz, syncopated dance music, baroque motifs, and artful discords, and there had already been forty cover versions published on disc by the time that members of the original cast recorded thirteen of the stage songs in December 1930.

"[Actress-singer Lotte] Lenya's piquant memoir of the opening night notes: 'In the streets no other tunes were whistled. A *Dreigroschen* [*Threepenny*] bar opened, where no other music was played.'"

In the Brecht-Weill piece, the central figure is Macheath (Mackie Messer in German), the selfish, amoral criminal who becomes involved with and marries Polly Peachum, the daughter of businessman Jonathan Peachum, who controls London's beggars. Peachum, unhappy about his daughter's relationship, wants Macheath arrested and hanged instead …

However, Pabst's piece is not strictly speaking "a Brecht work." In fact, the famed German playwright and poet (1898-1956) was fired from the project before filming began. The immediate, legal justification for Brecht's dismissal was his failure to produce a screenplay on time. In reality, he was excluded from the process because he proposed radical artistic and political alterations to the original work. Brecht was moving rapidly to the left under the conditions of economic and political disaster in the late 1920s.

Brecht sued the producers, and in an essay entitled "The Threepenny Lawsuit," he claimed, with some justification, that he was defending artists against victimization by the entertainment industry. The playwright asserted, "The Threepenny lawsuit [which he lost] demonstrates how far the process of transforming intellectual values into commodities has progressed."

Although Brecht was excluded from the final writing process, the three left-wing screenwriters (Béla Balázs, Léo Lania and Ladislaus Vajda) ended up using a good many of his changes. Pabst's film, an early talking picture, is a more overtly anti-capitalist polemic than the original stage version. The look and feel of the film suggest something of the chaos and social disintegration of the latter days of the Weimar Republic.

Even though less than half of Weill's music made it into the movie, the Pabst work is a fascinating historical and artistic document. Furthermore, it was banned by the Nazis, whose seizure of power also forced Brecht, Weill and Pabst into exile.

In the film, Rudolf Forster plays Mackie Messer (Mack the Knife), the gangster with middle class aspirations, who persuades Polly (Carola Neher) to marry him. As in the stage play, Polly is the willful daughter of Peachum (Fritz Rasp), the "prince of the beggars."

Peachum and his wife are not in favor of the liaison ("A mother-in-law ought to know where her son-in-law can be arrested"). Mackie receives protection from police chief Tiger Brown (Reinhold Schünzel), but Peachum threatens Brown with using his army of beggars to disrupt the Queen's coronation if Scotland Yard does not arrest Mackie. Jenny (Lenya), a prostitute and Mackie's former lover, alternately snitches on and rescues him.

In the end, Polly buys a bank to save Mackie from the gallows. A deal is struck between the banker (Polly), the crook (Mackie), the businessman (Peachum) and the cop (Brown). Peachum has witnessed "the power of the poor." When Mackie asks him, "If the poor are so powerful, then why do they need us?", Peachum replies, "Because they don't know that we need them."

While the movie is not entirely successful, there are too many static moments and faulty or time-killing characterizations (including the Reverend and Mackie's sidekicks), it has some magical and wrenching moments. Neher and Lenya are hypnotic as they sing their solos. Ernst Busch as the Street Singer begins and ends the movie with "The Ballad of Mack the Knife," although with altered lyrics to suit the occasion.

One of the film's high points is the confrontation between the beggars and the Queen: an angry crowd of the poor and disenfranchised stares down the vicious, outraged monarch. It is one of the last and most piercing images in Pabst's movie.

Into the foggy night, the disillusioned wretched vanish. Busch memorably sings:

"Gathered for the happy ending
All and sundry pool their might
When the needed funds are handy
Things will usually turn out right …
For some men live in darkness
While others stand in the light
We see those in the light
While the others fade from sight."

In the face of the Nazi taking of power two years later, it is a disturbing and even terrifying moment.

A final tragic note suggests how the fate of the Brecht-Weill play, as well as the Pabst film, is connected to the traumas of the 20th century. The radiant and talented Carola Neher, one of Brecht's regular performers and a supporter of the Communist Party of Germany, emigrated to the USSR after Hitler came to power. In 1936, Neher's husband, Anatol Becker, was arrested by the Stalin regime as a "Trotskyite." He was executed in 1937. Neher herself was also arrested and sentenced to 10 years in the gulag. She died of typhus in 1942.