

Der Jasager (The Yes-Sayer)

Der Jasager – rendered as *The Yea-Sayer* by early translators keen to stress the (ironic) Nietzschean reference, and as *He Said Yes* by John Willett in his recent version – is the last of the three works Weill composed at the invitation of Paul Hindemith; it is also his last major collaboration with Brecht before their flight from Germany in March 1933.

Like the *Mahagonny Songspiel* in 1927 and *The Lindbergh Flight* (a joint work with Hindemith) in 1929, *The Yes-Sayer* (1930) was written for one of the New Music festivals organised each June by Hindemith and his team. The site of the first three festivals had been the South German spa-town of Baden-Baden. The fourth, and as it turned out, the last, was held in Berlin, but followed its predecessors in highlighting certain areas of music-making considered important for the future. In 1929 the themes had been music specially written for film and radio; in 1930 the emphasis was on music for young players and audiences, whether for educational or for recreational purposes.

Four years older than Weill, Hindemith had first worked with him in 1923, when the quartet in which he played viola was preparing the world premiere of Weill's String Quartet Op.8. At that stage, Hindemith was already recognized as the outstanding figure among Germany's younger composers. His international reputation grew rapidly, and was already reflected in the character of his 1927 festival in Baden-Baden. The 1929 festival had been notable for the premiere of the Hindemith-Brecht *Lehrstück* and for the presence of Diaghileff, a recent convert to Hindemith's cause (though not, it would seem, to Weill's). The version of *The Lindbergh Flight* given in Baden-Baden that same year was nominally a collaboration between Weill and Hindemith, but in fact no more than an expedient division of labour.

Hindemith's subsequent approach to Weill with regard to an opera for schools did, however, reflect a lively sense that Weill had more to offer than could easily have been imagined by fashion-seeking admirers of the *Mahagonny Songspiel* or *The Threepenny Opera* (Berlin, 1928). Weill's music for *The Lindbergh Flight* was

certainly very different from Hindemith's, but the difference was not so great as to exclude some measure of mutual understanding and collegial respect, even allowing for an element of professional rivalry with regard to Brecht.

Hindemith's interest in continuing his collaboration with Brecht was, however, greatly diminished by his experiences with the *Lehrstück*. Willingly enough, though surely not without regret, he shelved his own settings of the *Lindbergh Flight* numbers in order to allow Weill to make his own settings and incorporate them in the concert version whose premiere Otto Klemperer conducted at one of his Berlin concerts in December 1929.

By that time Hindemith was far advanced with his plans for the educational aspect of his next June festival, 'New Music Berlin 1930'. The best-known of his own contributions was to be the *Singspiel We're Building a Town* – a charming piece which its publishers could well have advertised as a clean-living parent's reply to the recently premiered *Rise and Fall of Mahagonny City*. Wary of Brecht but not yet alienated, Hindemith was content to provide another platform for him in the 1930 festival, with Weill on the one side and Hanns Eisler on the other – Eisler having been one of the three former pupils of Schoenberg whom Hindemith had co-opted for the previous year's radio-music project in Baden-Baden.

A start was made on *The Yes-Sayer* in January 1930. As with *The Threepenny Opera*, the key figure at that point was Elisabeth Hauptmann, herself a teacher by training, and the only member of the Brecht circle fluent in English. Basically, and often line-for line, the text Weill set to music in the spring of 1930 was Hauptmann's translation of Arthur Waley's version of *Taniko*, as amended by Brecht in two respects – critically with regard to the excision of all traces (the obvious ones, anyway) of religious motivation and mystical aspiration, creatively with regard to additions and interpolations. These were significant but not extensive.

The 'Lehrstück' concept to which Brecht had introduced Hindemith in 1929 was pliable, and the word itself resists any one translation. 'Educational piece' is

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serviceable enough for today's purposes, and not inappropriate to Weill's remarks in the scripted interview which was broadcast before the radio premiere. Calling the piece *Lehrstück vom Ja-Sager*, he goes on to give three possible definitions of the subtitle 'Schuloper' (literally 'school-opera') – an opera for schools, an exercise for musicians, or a study-piece demonstrating certain principles of operatic composition.

In mid-May, only a month before the start of the New Music festival and just as Weill was proof-reading his score for *The Yes-Sayer*, the long-simmering dispute between Brecht and Hindemith suddenly boiled over and was made public – in the first place by Brecht and Eisler, who in fact had nothing to lose from the quarrel, and more than a morsel to gain from publicizing their view that Hindemith and his colleagues had been exercising a form of political censorship of their submitted script. Hindemith and his fellow board-members insisted on the 'purely artistic' nature of its doubts: irrespective of its content, the text submitted to them did not suggest a musical work, nor indeed had they had so much as a glimpse of the music itself. Whether they were given to understand that the offending text was (as it can only have been) a rough and incomplete draft remains, until now, an open question, and less important than the fact that the new 'educational piece', whatever its form at that stage, was intimately related to *The Yes-Sayer*; and the completed text for that – which Hindemith and his colleagues could have read at the same time, and indeed weeks before (had they asked Weill for it) – could well be mistaken for a play rather than the text for a musical work now nearing completion.

With appropriate flourishes, Brecht and Eisler dissociated themselves from the New Music festival and called for Hindemith's resignation. Unwisely attempting to take cover behind a hitherto unnoticed and evidently toothless Programme Committee, the New Music board complained that repeated requests for an inspection copy of Eisler's score had gone unanswered.

Outside Brecht's closest circle, Weill was perhaps the only person likely to have had

more than an inkling of the truth: with only a rough and incomplete draft of the text to go by, the festival was refusing to programme a musical work by Eisler and Brecht that didn't yet exist and couldn't possibly have been ready in time, even if Hindemith and his board had changed their minds overnight.

Publicly siding with Brecht – a fact seldom mentioned in the Brecht literature – Weill withdrew *The Yes-Sayer* from Hindemith's Festival. Privately, however, he had already made alternative arrangements, or at least prepared the ground for them. Thanks to Leo Kestenberg – a former piano-student of Busoni who became musical advisor to the Prussian Ministry of Science, Culture and Education in 1918 and four years later combined that important role with the management of the music department at the Central Institute for Education and Training – students from the Prussian Academy of Church and School Music were promptly engaged for a double premiere of *The Yes-Sayer*, immediately following the final day of Hindemith's festival.

The world premiere of *The Yes-Sayer* was a radio production relayed live by Berlin Radio on 23 June 1930; the stage premiere followed a day later and was given in the main hall of Kestenberg's music department at the Central Institute. Hindemith was indisposed on both evenings, and Brecht was holidaying in the South of France.

The success of *The Yes-Sayer* was immediate, and in its own way as extraordinary as that of *The Threepenny Opera*. A fortnight later Eisler began composing the recently-completed text of Brecht's rejected 'educational piece', *Die Massnahme*, or *The Decision* as John Willett calls it in his fine translation (1997). *The Decision* was a major turning-point in Brecht's development. Set in the revolutionary China of the 1920s and ostensibly a Marxist-Leninist interpretation of *The Yes-Sayer*, it was anathematised by the party-faithful from the day of its successful premiere in December 1930. Worse, it found some measure of acceptance in conservative and Catholic quarters – the same authorities who, to Brecht's horror, had joined the choruses of praise for *The Yes-Sayer*.

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Notable among the many schools that began their studies and rehearsals of *The Yes-Sayer* during the first school weeks in the autumn of 1930 was the famous Karl-Marx School in the Berlin district of Neukölln. Established by the democratic Socialists in the aftermath of World War I, and widely admired as a model for modern, progressive, and above all anti-authoritarian education, the Karl-Marx School provided Brecht with the kind of platform he needed for testing and correcting *The Yes-Sayer*. Weill was present, but according to one account, said little and for the most part was seated at or beside the piano. The impression that it was not for him a happy occasion would seem to be confirmed by his half-hearted attempts to incorporate in his score some of the textual changes and additions Brecht made (then and there, no doubt) in response to the forthright criticisms submitted by the students (aged 10-18, plus one 20-year-old from an adult training course for workers).

These incidental revisions, however admirable in principle, were in effect superseded by Brecht's simpler and more radical response to those and other criticisms. Before the end of the year, and probably before the December premiere of *The Decision*, he returned to the original version of *The Yes-Sayer*, exactly as Weill had first set it to music, and converted it into the counter-play *The No-Sayer* by means of a single and decisive change: a new final scene, substantiating the new title.

Common sense raised to an uncommonly high level of dramatic efficacy and poetic reticence, the last scene of *The No-Sayer* is worthy of Weill at his very best and incompatible with anything less or other than that. So why did Weill ignore the implicit challenge? True, he was busy with the composition of his three-act opera *Die Bürgschaft*; but not too busy to spare a few days for writing songs and incidental music for Brecht's production of *Mann ist Mann* (1931). More probably he foresaw that a truthful setting of the new finale would presuppose the re-composition of all the preceding scenes. But what would be the point of that, when *The Yes-Sayer*, from start to finish and exactly as he composed it, is an 'educational piece'



Der Jasager in rehearsal, Berlin, 1930

about the Yes-Sayer and his companions: it leads, but does not force, its performers and its audience to ask the obvious questions the text ignores, and hence to seek the very answers – including those of the No-Sayer – which the text cannot disclose. After all, the opening chorus – whose musical reprises at the start and the finish of Act II Brecht omits from all his own versions of the text – defines the paramount importance of studying the notion of 'Einverständnis', of consent or agreement, in terms of three crucial reservations: (1) many say yes without meaning it; (2) many are not asked; (3) many consent to, or agree with, what is actually and demonstrably wrong, mistaken, or duplicitous.

In his scripted interview, Weill remarks that the concept of agreement has 'a political meaning but not of course a party-political one'. The kind of 'agreement' which 43% of the German electorate arrived at in March 1933 was not – 'of course' – what Weill had in mind. Nevertheless his sensitivity to any such retrospective view of *The Yes-Sayer* is well attested and thoroughly understandable. As if poised between the approaching shadows of Hitler and Stalin yet slightly inclined towards the former, the Three Students act as one throughout *The Yes-Sayer*, and are composed accordingly. Their obedience to the law and the Custom is absolute ('We will obey' is their first statement), whereas that of The Teacher is not. What the Three Students stand for is not the *sense* of the law but the rule of it, not the nature of the 'Mighty Custom' but the preservation of it. In terms of Attic tragedy – precisely the

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tradition in which the post-Stravinskian Weill is composing, whatever his theorizing may suggest to the contrary – theirs is the first crime and theirs the ultimate responsibility. But the fatal flaw is in *The Teacher*, not in them. For they are pitiless and he is not; though knowing better than they, he gives his consent to the sacrifice of an individual in the highly questionable interests of a common good and a pagan custom.

Stripped of their religious (Buddhist) significance, the ‘Great Custom’ and the sacrifice it exacted were theoretically as amenable to Nazi mythologising as to Leninist extensions. The same latent duality (but without the Hydra-head of eugenics) is embedded in *The Decision*, but was more widely noted at the time, especially by the more thoughtful representatives of that democratic Left with which Leo Kestenberg openly identified himself. The only comparable contemporary critique of *The Yes-Sayer* was published in *Die Weltbühne*, the widely-read socialist (and pacifist) periodical edited by Carl von Ossietzky. Its title, ‘No to the Yes-Sayer’ would have sufficed as Brecht’s cue had there been no session at the Karl-Marx school.

Controversy and contradiction belong to the essence of *The Yes-Sayer*, but the controversies of seventy years ago are only relevant today in so far as the lessons and experiences of the intervening years – including quite recent ones – illumine our present reactions to the piece as a whole. *The Yes-Sayer* has never belonged to the canon of accepted masterpieces or acceptable repertory items, and does not apply for admission. To suggest that we listen to it in much the same way as we listen to, say, Stravinsky’s *Oedipus Rex*, or look at it in much the same way as we look at Britten’s East Anglian No-Play *Curlew River*, is not without its uses, so long as there is no implied appeal to upmarket value-judgements of a kind that Weill actively disavowed. Yet the dangers of aestheticizing and ossifying what is indeed an ‘educational piece’ are at least as threatening as they were seventy years ago, when Klemperer – whose political views at the time were closer to Brecht’s than to Weill’s – proposed to conduct *Der Jasager*

at one of his Berlin concerts, using players and singers from his opera ensemble.

It would surely have been a memorable performance: one has only to think of such things as the terrifying scene in the mountains where *The Teacher* is suborned by the Three Students, who then congratulate themselves on their cunning; or to explore, as if in Klemperer’s footsteps, the inner landscape of the closing scene, where even the Students seem transformed by the music’s sovereign perception of the rights and wrongs of all that has happened since the beginning. With every reason to appreciate what Klemperer might bring to the performance, Weill nevertheless persuaded him to substitute a performance by the students from the Academy of Church and School Music, under their own conductor. With regard to the work’s future, it was the young who had the first claims, or so Weill believed.

It was again the Academy students who performed *The Yes-Sayer* in Paris in December 1932, to rapturous acclaim from as distinguished an audience as Weill was ever to encounter. Kestenberg’s political enemies had long been calling for his blood, and much was now to be made of the ‘scandalous’ nature of the Paris programme to which he and his departments had lent their support. Years later, and long after Kestenberg had fled from Germany, that programme was still being cited by the Nazi authorities in their indictments of Kestenberg and his policies, on the ground that it had exposed the impressionable students from Berlin to the unmitigated depravities of the *Mahagonny Songspiel*.

Had Weill succeeded with his previous idea of pairing *The Yes-Sayer* with a Songspiel version of the *Happy End* music, there would actually have been greater cause for offence but less of an opening for propaganda. In 1929 *Happy End* had come and gone so swiftly that it never reached anyone’s blacklist. It should have done. But that was an honour reserved for *St Joan of the Stockyards* (1931-32) – as two of the *Happy End* numbers were already in effect announcing, a few weeks before the Wall Street crash and a few more before *The Yes-Sayer* chipped in.

David Drew

The *Happy End* Music



Carola Neher as Lillian Holliday in *Happy End*, 1948

Happy End is a comedy-with-music, first staged at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in Berlin on 2 September 1929. The music was written and scored during the summer of that year – some of it on holiday in the South of France (as was some of *The Threepenny Opera* a year before, but this time there's more of a sea-breeze and less of the Mistral). As for the *The Yes-Sayer*, there is barely a hint of it in *Happy End*. Though started only four months later, the school-opera belongs not only to a different strand in Weill's work, but to a different epoch and a changed world.

Music, book, and lyrics for *Happy End* were put together (or latterly, thrown together) in fulfilment of an ill-considered promise which the producer Ernst-Josef Aufricht had extracted from Weill and Brecht soon after the first-night triumph of *The Threepenny Opera*. At that time the notion of celebrating the first anniversary with a new show at the same Theater am Schiffbauerdamm no doubt seemed attractive. But it was easily forgotten: Weill already had a lot on his plate, and so had Brecht.

By the spring of 1929 Aufricht was becoming restless. Without a story outline and a substantial section of the script – and so far there'd been no sign of either – the casting arrangements couldn't be made before the summer break, and weeks of learning-time would be lost. Yet the show had to go into rehearsal in August and open at the beginning of September.

A rough draft of perhaps two-thirds of the script was duly extracted from the Brecht ménage, and Weill personally collected from Brecht an assortment of lyrics, several of them pre-dating the project (and at least one, 'Surabaya Johnny', already performed on stage in a setting by another composer).

The pages Aufricht distributed to his cast before the summer break were not unpromising, at least from the standpoint of his box-office: a romantic comedy with small-time hoodlums and a Salvation Army heroine, set in the Chicago of the 1920s. Today, the most striking characteristic of the story-line is its uncanny anticipation of Damon Runyon's 'The Idyll of Sarah Brown', a short story

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published in the early 1930s and immortalized for the stage in 1950 by Frank Loesser's great musical *Guys and Dolls*.

While the authorship of the *Happy End* lyrics could hardly have been concealed and was never questioned, that of the book is another story. It is now established beyond reasonable doubt that Brecht had from the start delegated his main task to the same Elisabeth Hauptmann who had provided him with the translations of Gay's *Beggar's Opera* and Waley's *The Valley Hurling*.

It was under the pen-name 'Dorothy Lane' that *Happy End* was eventually presented to Aufricht's loyal public and to the incredulous critics. Whereas the 'magazine story' on which it was allegedly based has never come to light and was doubtless Hauptmann's invention (in one sense or the other), Shaw's *Major Barbara* has been cited as a respectable ancestor, as has the Salvation Army scene in Georg Kaiser's Expressionist classic *From Morning to Midnight*. But *Happy End* was never meant to be respectable. In announcing its disdain for the traditions of high art, the very title was endorsing the message of Kaiser's *Kolportage* (1924), a successful comedy 'in the manner' of a dime-novel or penny-dreadful.

The splendid cast which Aufricht assembled for *Happy End* was headed by Carola Neher, Peter Lorre, Oskar Homolka, Kurt Gerron, and Helene Weigel. On the opening night, there was only a single interval. The first part was warmly received at curtain-fall, and hopes ran high. But the second part, whose script had been delivered piecemeal and in such a state that Aufricht finally lost track of it, began on the wrong foot and never recovered. Increasingly annoyed by the flimsiness of the story and the clumsiness of its development, the audience was in no mood to listen quietly to the final 'Hosianna Rockefeller' chorus, let alone to what followed: in the role of the mysterious Lady in Grey and also in her more important role as Brecht's wife – no mystery to most of Aufricht's public – Helene Weigel stepped forward, armed with a political pamphlet, and started to read from it. Like the 'magazine story', her text has never been traced. Nor are there any convincing

accounts of it. Amid the uproar, the announcement of some desired and perhaps happy end was completely obliterated. Regardless of political orientation, the press was uniformly hostile. Deciding to cut his losses, Aufricht closed the show immediately, and replaced it with a popular comedy.

For Weill, *Happy End* would have been a senseless diversion from his main activities had it not afforded him – as he was later to remark – an opportunity for enlarging, both technically and expressively, the 'song style' he had evolved for *The Threepenny Opera*. Recognizing that the evolution of his musical style had already taken him in quite another direction, he had been attracted by the idea of starting a secondary stream of 'plays with music' in which he would concentrate on exercising his abilities as a song-writer. In that respect the *Happy End* score represented, in his view, a real advance that had gone unnoticed only because the songs and choruses had been poorly integrated with a weak play.

Thanks to recordings, three of the songs ('Surabaya', 'Bilbao', and the Sailors' Tango) made their own way into the market-place, leaving the impression that the rest of the score could safely be forgotten (which it was – it remained unpublished and in limbo until long after Weill's death). Weill was evidently aware of that risk: four years after the Schiffbauerdamm fiasco, he considered rescuing the score from oblivion by preparing a 'Songspiel' version with a scenario or simple dramatic framework by Brecht. But his relations with Brecht were uneasy, and he was soon distracted by a new commitment and then by the circumstances of his flight from Germany in 1933.

The first-ever concert-version of the complete score was the one prepared for the London Sinfonietta and its debut at the Berlin Festival in 1975 (with David Atherton conducting). It was subsequently recorded, and used as the basis of an effective TV film (directed by Peter Adam). Slightly revised for performances ten years ago, it has been revised again for the different circumstances of today.

Dramatically unmotivated as most of them are, the musical numbers suggest

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in themselves a random sequence between two fixed points, the first of which is clearly the 'Bilbao Song'. As the only survivor from a shabby dance-hall that had been a bit of heaven for its clients until the new landlords and their posh accountants refurbished and wrecked it, the pianist infallibly responds to the murmured request, 'Play it again, Joe', and back come the rusty memories of paradise lost.

Alone among the *Happy End* numbers, the 'Bilbao Song' accepts as a fact of life the impermanence of everyone's favourite haunt. The text of a later song will claim that Mother Goddam's whorehouse in Mandalay was another such paradise – a very nice brothel if you happen to like brothels, as Runyon remarks somewhere. But the music, in its structure as in its character, points in quite another direction. Today, the 'Mandalay Song' may perhaps call *Carmina Burana* to mind, at least until its euphoric C major refrain. But its true destination was always the concluding though deliberately inconclusive chorus, 'Hosianna Rockefeller'.

Between 'Bilbao' and 'Rockefeller' the possible permutations are legion. The only alternative to imposing order by means of a simple dramatic framework such as Weill was considering in 1932 is a free-standing 'song cycle' in which the main criteria are contrast and coherence – musical contrast with regard to tonality and character, and textual coherence within each of the self-defined areas. The distinct and apparently hostile territories of the sacred and the profane are separated by a twilight zone in which, for instance, the Sailor's Tango couples its profanities with a Sunday-School moral that might have served as a warning for President Hoover and his financial advisors: in the bluest of blue seas, sailors can forget that storms have a way of catching people unawares. As General William Booth could have told them, the Great Leveller spares no-one.

So much for life on earth. But what of the hereafter? Weill would hardly wish to remind us that the first of the Salvation Army's little waltz songs has the same title and much the same message as one of Bach's great motets. The pedal-point on which the entire song is lovingly

constructed happens to be the 'dominant' of the C major waltz-song which obligingly follows: here the salvationists remind their little congregation that the care and comfort of a mother's hand are not lost with childhood but are available to all who hearken to the message of the mission-hall bell. In the industrial Midlands where the army of General William Booth was doing battle during Weill's relatively golden childhood, some such melody, and just such thoughts, would surely have been more familiar than a Bach motet.

Condescension was not in Weill's nature. If it had been, he would have needed quite another strategy for *Happy End*. In that sense his setting of the exemplary tale of the Liquor Dealer is itself exemplary: unhealthily overweight though it is, the main melody is plainly striving for better things, and in due course is rewarded by tearful repentance, enraptured five-part choral harmony, and a barnstorming E-major cadence. But the development of the comedy owes much to the terse *alla marcia* interjections of the missionary chorus, which serve to underline the fact that the Liquor Dealer's ill-gotten gains will be distributed to the deserving poor. But they are also a reminder that the battle for his soul is a metaphor for another battle, and one whose purely secular objectives are defined in the march song of God's Little Lieutenant, 'Obacht, gebt Obacht' (Watch out, take care).

Sung by the same Lilian Holiday who shocks her colleagues with the unladylike 'Sailors' Tango', the march-song is diametrically opposed to the asocial philosophy propounded by the 'Lily of Hell' song. From the conflict between these two mutually exclusive principles the pseudo-finale of *Happy End* arises. Its setting is the Mission-Hall, expensively refurbished with the proceeds of a shady deal with the captains of industry – a fate even worse than renovation of the Bilbao dance hall.

The two main elements in 'Hosianna Rockefeller' are the stark and forbidding litanies with which it begins, and the outrageously jocular foxtrot that follows. Both elements are disguised variants of familiar material – the former an exact augmentation of the opening motif and

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harmonies of the 'Mandalay Song', the latter a deceptive allusion to the 'Bilbao Song' and the 'good old days' represented by its guileless refrain. The foxtrot has two hairpin-bends in it, the second of them having an eight-bar orchestral extension that develops a motif from the 'Lily of Hell' and might well be announcing the otherwise unexpected arrival of the Lady in Grey. Wholly untoward is the interruption of the foxtrot's next reprise by the dissenting voices of Lilian and her lover, recalling the march-song in almost Mussorgskian tones and reminding the assembled salvationists of their forgotten objectives. The plea is apparently to no avail, for the response to it is unanimous, massive, and crushing. Yet the foxtrot's final and raucous reprise is only allowed to run its course in order that the same tonal twist as before can lead to a final *fortissimo* cadence in E minor – tonally speaking the furthest possible remove from the 'home' key of the Hosannas. Something, the music tells us, has yet to happen.

And what happened, among many other things (including of course the Wall Street crash, the premiere of the *Mahagonny* opera, and the composition of *The Yes-Sayer*) was a major play by Brecht. As he had done when incorporating elements from *The Yes-Sayer* in *The Decision*, Brecht rescued from *Happy End* the few motifs that were useful to him. Like *Happy End*, the verse play *St Joan of the Stockyards* (1931-32) is set in Chicago. Lieutenant Johanna Dark is the reincarnation of Lilian Holiday, and the text of Lilian's march-song ('Obacht, gebt Obacht') is declaimed near the start of the play by Johanna's colleagues. Its spirit is eventually and likewise betrayed. Towards the end, the wounded and dying Johanna Dark delivers her last plea on behalf of the dispossessed and their class interests, while her colleagues, who have espoused the cause of the arch-capitalist Pierpont Mauler, try to shout her down with the same Hosannas that initiate the final chorus of *Happy End*.

David Drew