In the summer of 1933, having fallen out with Bertolt Brecht, Weill approached Jean Cocteau to deliver a libretto of weight and political significance exploring the catholic notion of the seven deadly sins. (The sins were a medieval construction, loosely based on biblical dicta, but having roots in Hellenic astrological rites of the fourth century (Bloomfield, 1941)).

Cocteau, it transpired, was busy. Weill was forced to beg Brecht to complete the project for him, and it became their final collaboration. Their mutual history had been both impressive and highly fraught, culminating in their famous fall-out over Mahoganny in 1928 (Heisler, 2006). They were the creators of a political theatre, yet after three months of detailed collaboration on the new project, Brecht appears to have lost interest, and uncharacteristically left Weill with very little oversight to complete the work (Juchem, 2009).

“Die Sieben Todsünden” seemed a pertinent metaphor for the Jewish born Weill, who, having already moved to Paris, watched the declining German political and social conditions from afar. Weill was a leading musical figure in the early Weimar republic, yet Nazism was rapidly rising in Germany, ultimately leading to his move to America in 1935.

Brecht and Weill’s collaborations are famous for their spirited satire on the political structure, Marxist leanings and their agitating agenda (Juchem, 2009). Brecht’s focus was on moral provocation (Ziolkowski, 2009), “not the straining towards a climax but the cumulative effect of the scenes.” (Gorelik, 1957 quoted in Martin & Bial, 2000) Weill lifts the material away from Brecht’s pondering didacticism, into compelling dramatic musical scenas tinged with sarcasm.

Weill sought to transform opera and musical theatre, and espoused his own conception of Wagner’s “Gesamtkunstwerk”. He was interested in developing a new aesthetic of opera and musical theatre, where acting and singing held equal importance, and vocal colour was beholden to the dramatic demands of the role, sacrificing beauty at times for dramatic intention (Albrecht, 2000). His first opera had yet to be premiered when he noted, “Musically and vocally our opera singers are fit for new tasks, but in terms of acting—he it facial expression or body language or general movement—opera performances lag far behind the accomplishments of today’s theatre. The lack of genuine, natural performances is especially painful.” (Juchem, 2009).

Weill was opposed to the hedonistic nature of nineteenth century opera, and aimed his theatre squarely at the bourgeois (Albrecht, 2000). A “ballet chante” rather than an opera, “Die Sieben Todsünden” under Weill became an experiment in genre, and gender, bending. Anna’s mother is
played by a baritone. The two protagonists, a dancer and a singer, are often presented as two aspects of the female, and Anna I has historically been played with some androgyny, following the lead of Weill’s wife and muse, Lotte Lenya.

The discussion currently heard on the political left that America’s excesses are responsible for rampant materialism and the destruction of core values, coupled with religious piety, has clear and present parallels to Brecht’s own views on America, and Germany, in the 1930s (Ruland, 1963). It allows the presentation of two sides of any story. Brecht also used the split personality metaphor in many of his works as a tool to compare dueling ideals of personal desire and collective good (Demetz, 1962).

Weill, throughout his career writing for German and American stages, intentionally juxtaposes high art and popular music. Like Gershwin’s “Porgy and Bess” of the same period, “Die Sieben Todsünden” arrestes with its simplicity and use of popular idiom, but its treatment of that idiom is complex. For example, his experimentation with waltz, foxtrot, popular song and march elements are able to delineate personal suffering on the one hand, and with sarcasm, the lightness of bourgeois concerns on the other.

Weill and his muse, wife and cabaret artist Lotte Lenya, pioneered a kind of ‘whole theatre’ performance; an idea that has unfolded since, albeit with some difficulty. The quite recent cleaving of opera and musical theatre into parts: historical interpretation (opera) and the transformation of high art into popular form (musical theatre) points by omission to the brilliance of Weill’s ability to meld these elements together in one whole. Weill’s elevating or devolving each genre as needed, produces a cynical interplay of different textures that are central elements of his distinctive style.

*Seven Deadly Sins* is socio-political satire of 1930s Germany (Heisler, 2006). Some of the work is set in New Orleans, and one can find some parallel social conditions and attitudes in the USA during 2005, as Hurricane Katrina decimated the city. The discussion currently heard on the political left that America’s excesses are responsible for rampant materialism and the destruction of core values, coupled with religious piety, has clear and present parallels to Brecht’s own views on America, and indeed Germany, in the 1930s (Ruland, 1963).

Now that music theatre has in some ways caught up to Weill’s all-encompassing ideal, this work has a new music resonance, as well as political salience. Bringing Weill’s idea of New Orleans into a new century gives a new urgency and presence to this work. New historical parallels lift a potentially nostalgic period cabaret to a bitter analysis of the seven distinct failures of systems, of protection, of faith, of politics, of ideals, of democracy, of humanity even, that occurred so recently in the USA. This updating attempts to revive the political portent of the Brecht/Weill collaboration for current audiences (Ziolkowski, 2009).

Though minimalist due to the constraints of space and funding, this production attempts to personalise the story of the Annas, exploring the dictum “the personal is political” (Hanisch, 1978). It attempts to create true theatrical motion by developing a through-line across the sisters’ journey into hell and back, a hell found, cynically, in the belly of the world’s most successful capitalist democracy.

Perhaps unintended by Weill and Brecht, a feminist reading of the work also can be seen when epic is partnered with the simple and the personal. Anna faces choices of great spiritual weight. She survives battered to return home from her excursion into a man’s world, chastened and wizened by the life outside. Whether or not she follows her foolish desires the result is the same, and thus suffering marks women who push boundaries and follow individual desires. The two Annas are two representations of the female, choosing two paths and two destinies that end in equal torment. As the libretto states, the women share ‘a past, a future, a heart and a pocketbook’. Weill’s cynicism is expressed thus: Anna will experience suffering, even if she renounces sin.

This production confronts the personal as political, addressing the enculturation of a woman in a world dominated by bourgeois materialism and religious piety. The cynicism with which Brecht presents his worldview can derail nuanced acting, but this writer sees Weill’s satire as more nuanced, and accessible through the exploration of the personal. This performance is an attempt to present the journey of Anna as a slow descent into the inevitable trials of living in an “entitled” America in 2005.
Brecht and Weill’s cynicism is filled with purpose, and hopefully this production captures the strength and virtue in Weill’s theatrical method. It is hoped this production leaves the audience wondering what could have been, both in New Orleans post-hurricane 2005, and in Germany, 1933...

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


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