


RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘The Saga of Lenny’: Bernstein’s *Trouble in Tahiti* and Weill’s *Lady in the Dark*

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Abstract

Leonard Bernstein’s *Trouble in Tahiti* created a stepping stone towards his own brand of serious but accessible music theater. While he dedicated the opera in seven scenes to Marc Blitzstein, that path was paved by the formal innovations of Kurt Weill. A comparative analysis of *Trouble in Tahiti* with *Lady in the Dark* reveals that Bernstein derived essential impulses from Weill’s musical play, although the few statements he made about his music indicate ambivalence and competition, particularly with regard to Weill’s American works. As Bernstein’s female protagonist, Dinah, struggles to define herself vis-à-vis the institution of marriage, the themes of psychoanalysis, Hollywood glamour and the use of song as a meta-dramatic topic emerge as common threads. Select harmonies, instrumentation and rhythmic devices further evince debts to the precursor of Weill. But while Liza of *Lady in the Dark* finds her musical cure, Dinah does not meet with personal fulfilment.

Keywords: Weill; Bernstein; Music theater; Influence; Intertextuality

Weill, Bernstein and the genesis of *Trouble in Tahiti*

‘Saw *Lady in the Dark* tonight, & loved it’, Bernstein wrote to Copland in December of 1940. ‘It is, as you say, slick – over-slick – but I’m no critic, being an analysand(!).’¹ The letter represents one of the few occasions that Bernstein mentioned Weill. He encountered *Die Dreigroschenoper* in 1937 as a college student at Harvard, through a recording with Lotte Lenya singing the role of Jenny. ‘I instantly fell in love with the *ganze Ehepaar*’, he recalled nearly four decades later. Bernstein went on to describe Weill’s music as ‘at best a gift from heaven, and at the worst always interesting. Even the works of the “American period”, usually considered less authentic than the Berlin ones, are fascinating to my mind, original and always professional, down to the slightest show tune.’²

In June 1952, two years after Weill’s death, Bernstein had premiered Marc Blitzstein’s English adaptation, *The Threepenny Opera*, in a concert performance at Brandeis University’s Festival of Creative Arts. He conducted from Weill’s original holograph full score of *Die Dreigroschenoper*, which had been hidden from the Nazis in Vienna by the

¹ Nigel Simeone, ed., *The Leonard Bernstein Letters* (New Haven and London, 2013), 114.

² Leonard Bernstein, ‘A Gift from Heaven’, in *Weill-Lenya*, ed. Henry Marx (New York, 1976), Preface.

publisher Universal Edition and, that year, shipped to New York.³ Before returning the manuscript, however, Blitzstein crossed out the German titles with red pencil and replaced them with English translations, while Bernstein entered conductor's markings and text cues based on Blitzstein's narration in red and blue pencil.⁴

The *Threepenny* premiere coincided with a turning point in Bernstein's career as a composer for the stage.⁵ *Trouble in Tahiti*, which he dedicated to Blitzstein, was presented two days later at the Brandeis festival, an event which Bernstein hoped would 'seek a key to the future'.⁶ He had written the libretto and sketched the music at great speed in Cuernavaca, Mexico in May 1951, but would grow frustrated later that year, writing to his brother, Burton, 'maybe you can tell me how to finish my fucking little opera'.⁷ Bernstein finished composing from the same cabin outside Saratoga, New York, where Blitzstein had been working on his musical drama *Reuben Reuben*, just in time for the festival.⁸

Like the magazine editor Liza Elliott in *Lady in the Dark*, the female protagonist of *Trouble in Tahiti*, Dinah, is in the midst of a personal crisis. Scenes of a loveless marriage in suburbia are surreally juxtaposed with her world of fantasy, first as recounted to an invisible psychiatrist (scene 3), then following her visit to the movies (scene 6). Both stage works explore the heroine's inner conflict to define herself vis-à-vis the man (or men) in her life and society at large. While Liza must reconcile her professional ambitions with the prospect of settling down, Dinah struggles to maintain a fulfilled personal life while playing the role of housewife to her husband, Sam. Both works create an unflinching portrayal of the social realities faced by women in mid-century America. The conventions of marriage for both sexes are also placed under scrutiny, particularly in *Trouble in Tahiti*.⁹

Bernstein's drafts included extended recitative and dialogue for Dinah that create an even more intense psychological portrait than in the final edition. In his first sketchbook, before Dinah recounts her dream in the song 'I Was Standing in a Garden' (scene 3), she exclaims: 'You call this a life? Day after day of the same humiliation. Day after day with no consideration of what it means to be a woman.'¹⁰ Most striking, however, is the active role of the psychiatrist (who would ultimately be made invisible). This dynamic, rather the juxtaposition of Dinah's unconscious journey with the mundane world of Sam's professional life, takes the foreground in an earlier version of scenes 3–4: 'Tell the dream, right from the beginning', the (unnamed) psychiatrist says in a holograph piano-vocal score, 'What happened then?'¹¹ Unused lyrics lend nightmarish dimensions to her recollection: 'The ground beneath me burned / Stones were ev'rywhere I turned. And worst of all, / There was the noise ... a roar like the roar of millions of flies.'¹²

³ The score was originally dispatched for a performance at New York City Opera but passed on to Bernstein by Associated Music Publishers. David Farneth, 'The Score as Artifact', in *Die Dreigroschenoper: A Facsimile of the Holograph Full Score*, ed. Edward Harsh (New York, 1996), 19–24, at 22.

⁴ Farneth, 'The Score as Artifact', 21.

⁵ Bruce D. McClung and Paul Laird, 'Musical Sophistication on Broadway: Kurt Weill and Leonard Bernstein', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, eds. William A. Everett and Paul Laird (Cambridge, 2002), 167–78. The authors note that although Bernstein's 'conducting career was firmly established, the period following the *Threepenny Opera* concert was devoted to the stage'.

⁶ Humphrey Burton, *Leonard Bernstein* (London, 2017), 220.

⁷ Burton, *Leonard Bernstein*, 220.

⁸ Burton, *Leonard Bernstein*, 220.

⁹ *Trouble in Tahiti*, sketched before Bernstein finally married the actress Felicia Montealegre, clearly reveals his own apprehension about married life. Helen Smith, *There's a Place For Us: The Musical Theatre Works of Leonard Bernstein* (Farnham, UK, 2011), 49; Burton, *Leonard Bernstein*, 209–16; and Andreas Jaensch, *Leonard Bernsteins Musiktheater. Auf dem Weg zu einer Amerikanischen Oper* (Kassel, 2003), 183.

¹⁰ Leonard Bernstein, Papers, 1075/12, Library of Congress, Music Division, Washington, DC.

¹¹ Bernstein Papers, 1075/4.

¹² Bernstein Papers, 1075/4.

Dinah's relationship with her psychiatrist emerges as early as a scene 1 sketch in which she declares 'home is a place to get safe on my analyst couch'.¹³ There is also an unexpected kiss for Sam and Dinah before the vocal trio breaks out into song; and yet the tensions between the couple are made more explicit. Sam 'hatefully gives her money' in a version of scene 7 after lamenting the lack of 'one day without the dark dollar'.¹⁴ In an alternative draft of the scene 6 finale, he tells Dinah 'you never shut up!' as they sit at the dinner table (rather than the fireside). And it is she, rather than Sam, who suggests going to the movies.¹⁵

The movie scene was subject to extensive revisions. An alternative opening creates a downtrodden rather than boisterous tone, with a 'draggy' 6/8 time signature and dynamic marking of *piano* rather than 4/4 and *fortissimo*.¹⁶ The melody rises diatonically to repeated chordal accompaniment (as opposed to chromatically descending motives in the orchestra), and Dinah's lyrics are more despairing: 'It's revolting ... It's so stupid, so childish.' In yet another version, she opens the number wailing 'MAA' together with the vocal trio, on an E flat chord blasting with horns, trumpet, trombone, tuba and timpani alongside two oboes, English horn, violins, viola and harp.¹⁷

By fashioning his own libretto and setting out to create an unflinchingly honest portrayal of American domestic life in operatic terms, Bernstein clearly had Blitzstein and, in particular, his opera *Regina* in mind.¹⁸ Blitzstein in turn admitted to friends that, while 'lively musically', *Trouble in Tahiti* suffered from a 'dreary' story and 'somewhat inept lyrics'.¹⁹ Bernstein himself called the opera in seven scenes 'half-baked'²⁰ (he rewrote the final scene for subsequent performances and would be so haunted by his problem child that he created the sequel, *A Quiet Place*, three decades later). *Trouble in Tahiti* was above all an experimental work that paved the way towards *Candide* and *West Side Story*, stage works which embody his ambition to write a 'real moving American opera that any American can understand'.²¹ Even more so than by Blitzstein, that development was influenced by the formal innovations of Weill.

If Bernstein openly acknowledged the impact of Blitzstein on his creative development, the few statements he made about Weill evince ambivalence, conflict and competition, in particular with regard to Weill's American works.²² In 1947, after a performance of *Street Scene*, he was heard backstage by Weill's assistant and piano coach, Lys Symonette, muttering, 'this isn't worth *drei Groschen!*'²³ Three decades later, following a matinee led by John Mauceri, Bernstein reportedly commented to the conductor over dinner, 'I am not

¹³ Bernstein Papers, 1075/11.

¹⁴ Bernstein Papers, 1075/11.

¹⁵ Bernstein Papers, 1075/6.

¹⁶ Bernstein Papers, 1075/13.

¹⁷ Bernstein Papers, 1085/11.

¹⁸ Bernstein was so passionate about the stage work's historic importance that he wrote a preview piece identifying a tradition of 'natural musical theatre – one which is unique in the world, and wholly an outgrowth of our culture' ('Prelude to a Blitzstein Musical Adaptation', *New York Times*, 30 October 1949). He would also attempt to convince the administration of Milan's La Scala to mount the opera, in 1955 (Simeone, ed., *The Leonard Bernstein Letters*, 330–2).

¹⁹ Howard Pollack, *Marc Blitzstein: His Life, His Work, His World* (Oxford, 2012), 186.

²⁰ Burton, *Leonard Bernstein*, 220.

²¹ Leonard Bernstein, 'Me, Composer – You Jane', in *Findings* (New York, 1982), 129.

²² Bernstein described Blitzstein as 'the giant who had written those notes which seduced my soul' (Bernstein, 'Tribute to Marc Blitzstein', in *Findings*, 223). For more about the composers' close relationship, see Pollack, *Marc Blitzstein*, 184–5 and Burton, *Leonard Bernstein*, 52 ff.

²³ Symonette in interview with Kowalke (3 April 1991); quoted in Kim Kowalke, 'The *Threepenny Opera*: The Score Adapted', in Harsh, ed., *Die Dreigroschenoper: A Facsimile of the Holograph Full Score*, 11–17, at 12. The remark echoes Berg, who in 1928 admitted that 'the likes of us cannot make up our minds in favor of a "Threepenny

convinced'.²⁴ In Bernstein's 1976 Norton Lectures at Harvard University, Stravinsky emerges as the foremost model of neo-classicism and bi-tonality, while Weill is mentioned only once as an example of a German composer who could not help but be seduced by American vernacular.²⁵

Elizabeth Wells wonders if Bernstein was 'simply trying to absolve himself of any unintended plagiarism by allying himself with canonical composers such as Stravinsky.'²⁶ 'By creating a kind of evolutionary narrative of musical style', she writes of the Norton Lectures, 'Bernstein ultimately places himself within a tradition that extends at least back to Berlioz ... without appearing to be so presumptuous as to baldly state this.'²⁷ In Paul Laird's view, Bernstein overemphasised the principle of eclecticism in his analyses of Stravinsky and Beethoven, composers whom he acknowledged as direct influences, as a possible justification for 'what many might consider the derivative nature of his music'.²⁸ The conductor-scholar Leon Botstein, meanwhile, unequivocally identified Bernstein's talent as the possible grounds for a lack of originality in his compositional output while calling him 'probably the most gifted musician of twentieth-century America': 'like Kurt Weill, but with less originality, Bernstein studied the techniques of "serious" composers and adapted them for the popular stage'.²⁹

A musical borrowing can pay homage to a precursor or represent a covert source of influence. Christopher Reynolds has distinguished between allusions that are 'assimilative', transferring the meaning of the earlier text to a new context, and 'contrastive', creating a sense of 'contrary meaning'.³⁰ Yet he also notes the role of repression: 'the more famous the original, the greater the need for concealment'.³¹ When Bernstein quotes a melodic fragment from the dinner party scene of *Regina* in 'Maria' of *West Side Story*, he establishes the stage work as an operatic tragedy in a tradition extending back to Blitzstein.³² On a deeper formal level, however, he was indebted to *Street Scene* as he drew upon the emotional depth of late Romantic opera and the immediacy of the

Opera" or a "Ten-Thousand-Dollar Symphony"; Stephen Hinton, *Weill's Musical Theater: Stages of Reform* (Berkeley, 2012), 472.

²⁴ Interview with the author (30 January 2020).

²⁵ Playing an excerpt from 'Mackie Messer' at the piano, Bernstein maintains that 'even some Germans are going to be affected by this dose of fresh air' but that 'Stravinsky thought of it first, as usual', in *L'Histoire du Soldat*; Leonard Bernstein, *The Unanswered Question: Six Talks at Harvard* (Cambridge, 1976), 265. Weill, for his part, had acknowledged *L'Histoire du Soldat* as 'the most important and valuable musical work of our time' in 1926; Kurt Weill, 'Stravinskys Geschichte vom Soldaten', in *Kurt Weill. Musik und Theater. Gesammelte Schriften, mit einer Auswahl von Gesprächen und Interviews*, ed. Stephen Hinton and Jürgen Schebera (Berlin, 1990), 229. His writings and radio broadcasts further indicate Bach, Beethoven, Verdi, Mozart and his teacher, Ferruccio Busoni, as important sources of inspiration for his own music.

²⁶ Elizabeth A. Wells, *West Side Story: Cultural Perspectives on an American Musical* (Lanham, MD, 2011), 60.

²⁷ Wells, *West Side Story*, 90.

²⁸ In a 1982 interview, the composer asked rhetorically, 'Who are you if not the sum of everything that's happened before? Everything that has been significant in your experience, unconsciously mainly.' Paul R. Laird, *Leonard Bernstein: A Guide to Research* (London, 2002), 14.

²⁹ Leon Botstein, 'The Tragedy of Leonard Bernstein', *Harper's Magazine* (1 May 1983), 38–62, at 40.

³⁰ Christopher Reynolds, *Motives for Allusion: Context and Content in Nineteenth-Century Music* (Cambridge, 2003), 15–16.

³¹ Reynolds, *Motives for Allusion*, 41–2; 'in Bloomian terms', Reynolds continues, 'the better known the poetic source, the greater the need for a strong misreading'. For more about 'misreading', see Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford, 1973); Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford, 1975).

³² The allusion takes place on the words 'And suddenly that name'. Allen Shawn writes that 'the continuation of the melody after the initial three-note cell comes so close to the orchestral introduction to the dinner party scene in Blitzstein's *Regina*, completed in 1948, that one can assume it is directly influenced by it': *Leonard Bernstein: An American Musician* (New Haven, 2014), 144. Also see Geoffrey Block, *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from Show Boat to Sondheim* (Oxford, 1997), 251–2.

Broadway musical.³³ A comparative analysis of *West Side Story* with Weill's Broadway opera reveals structural, harmonic and motivic parallels in the numbers of the main characters, Tony and Maria, on the one hand, and Sam and Rose, on the other.³⁴

Bernstein's multiple talents and wide-ranging career notoriously led to an internal struggle that especially plagued him in his final years.³⁵ Upon Bernstein's seventieth birthday, Stephen Sondheim rewrote 'The Saga of Jenny' from *Lady in the Dark* as 'The Saga of Lenny', teasing him about the inability to make up his mind as a composer, conductor, performer and educator: 'Poor Lenny / Ten gifts too many / the curse of being versatile / To show how bad the curse is / We'll need a lot of verses / and take a little Weill.'³⁶ The final line of this refrain would indicate that the composer provided important creative impulses to Bernstein as he navigated a career straddling opera houses, Broadway theaters, television studios and more. And yet Bernstein inclined to align himself either with European canonical composers or native-born Americans. In a 1948 talk on national television, he created a narrative in which Weill becomes a secondary figure in serious Broadway music theatre, reversing a logical chronology and omitting the precedent of *Die Dreigroschenoper*: 'One serious composer, Marc Blitzstein, had even invaded Broadway with his odd, original opera, *The Cradle Will Rock*. Then Kurt Weill had brought his whole German training to Broadway in works such as *Lady in the Dark*.'³⁷

Rather than acknowledge the formative role of the German-born Weill on American traditions, Bernstein expressed confidence that a movement in musical theater 'borrowing this from opera, that from revue, the other from operetta, something else from vaudeville' had led to a new, distinctly American form: 'opera but *in our own way*'.³⁸ Invoking a pivotal moment in history, but also tacitly enshrining himself as a key figure on the threshold, Bernstein drew a parallel to the *Singspiel*, specifically Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*: 'all we need is for our Mozart to come along. If and when he does, we surely won't get any *Magic Flute*.'³⁹

³³ Weill was the first to use the term 'Broadway Opera'; Larry Stempel, *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (New York, 2010), 372. Stempel identifies *Street Scene* as 'the keystone in the conceptual arch which connects such American operas that followed it to Broadway' as *Regina* and *West Side Story*; Larry Stempel, 'Street Scene and the Enigma of Broadway Opera', in *A New Orpheus: Essays on Kurt Weill*, ed. Kim Kowalke (New Haven, 1986), 321–41, at 325.

³⁴ This is the subject of Chapter 5 in the author's book *Weill, Blitzstein, and Bernstein: A Study of Influence* (forthcoming from University of Rochester Press/Boydell & Brewer, June 2023) and the author's recent lecture on *Street Scenes* at the symposium 'Music, Cinema, and Modernism: The Works and Heritage of Kurt Weill between Europe and America' (University of Torino, 19 May 2021).

³⁵ In a *New York Times* article published a month before the premiere of *Candide*, Bernstein penned a fictive conversation between his 'irrepressible demon' (Id) and his ego (L.B.) exposing an unconscious battle about the introduction of European convention to the Broadway stage ('Colloquy in Boston', 18 November 1956). Also Wells, *West Side Story*, 60.

³⁶ For a discussion of the song's significance: Hinton, *Stages of Reform*, 470–2. The lyrics are printed in Jane Fluegel, ed., *Bernstein Remembered: A Life in Pictures* (New York, 1991), 134. I am grateful to Elmar Juchem for directing me to the video recording, which captures the song in its entirety, as performed by Lauren Bacall with Paul Ford on piano: [youtube.com/watch?v=zRB-HP9rPGQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRB-HP9rPGQ) (esp. 0:56–1:14).

³⁷ Leonard Bernstein, 'American Musical Comedy', in *The Joy of Music* (London, 1960), 152–79, at 160.

³⁸ Bernstein, 'American Musical Comedy', 161.

³⁹ Bernstein, 'American Musical Comedy', 161. Stempel writes that 'Bernstein's parallel between the flowering of German opera and the state of the Broadway musical circa 1950 had an air of pretension about it ... it was not so much Broadway's musical "moment in history" as his own.' Larry Stempel, 'Broadway's Mozartean Moment, or An Amadeus in Amber', in *Sennets & Tuckets: A Bernstein Celebration*, ed. Steven Ledbetter (Boston, 1988), 39–56, at 41. Also Kim Kowalke, 'Theorizing the Golden Age Musical: Genre, Structure, Syntax', *Gamut: Online Journal of the Music Theory Society of the Mid-Atlantic* (special issue: *A Music-Theoretical Matrix: Essays in Honor of Allen Forte [Part V]*, ed. David Carson Berry) 6/2 (2013), 133–84, at 180, trace.tennessee.edu/gamut/vol6/iss2/6 (accessed 16 August 2022).

Stage reform

In *Die Dreigroschenoper*, Weill sought to renew operatic tradition by returning to a ‘prototype’ or ‘original form’ (*Urform*).⁴⁰ The *Urform* embodies a return to classical values as advanced by Weill’s teacher, Ferruccio Busoni, whose notion of Young Classicity entailed renewing or rebuilding upon the past to create ‘art that is at once old and new’.⁴¹ If Weill may have deluded himself about the extent to which he upheld his teacher’s principles as he adapted to the commercial demands of American theatre,⁴² he remained committed to what he in 1928 termed ‘theatre music (in a Mozartean sense)’ in which form, above all, determines a work’s viability.⁴³ ‘The ideal composer is the one (like Mozart) who gives all these different elements of music equal importance’, he wrote in 1949, ‘so that they all contribute equally towards the one aim which is form.’⁴⁴

Later that year, he admitted to a friend in Germany that ‘everybody thought I was crazy when I started with serious musical plays’, as opposed to the revues and musical comedies of which Broadway consisted ‘almost entirely’ upon his arrival in the USA.⁴⁵ Weill may have been poised to become a tastemaker in his adopted country, however, given a trans-Atlantic style that was as ‘American’ as it was ‘German’ even before exile.⁴⁶ The montage principle underlying his stage works retained continuity with what we know as the *Zeitoper* movement which, in addition to tackling current events, oriented itself towards a broad audience, including the commercial theatre, took an ironic stance towards Romantic forms (specifically, Wagner), and integrated disparate elements such as jazz and modern dance music.⁴⁷ Weill ostensibly felt no need to make an aesthetic distinction between his pre- and post-exile periods, as he repeatedly emphasised in his statements and writings.⁴⁸ His exposure to Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* one month after his arrival in the USA meanwhile reinforced Weill’s conviction that it would be possible to write serious musical plays for the American stage.⁴⁹

⁴⁰ ‘Korrespondenz über Dreigroschenoper’, in Hinton and Schebera, eds., *Kurt Weill. Musik und Theater*, 54–6, at 55.

⁴¹ Ferruccio Busoni, ‘Junge Klassizität’, in *Von der Einheit der Musik. Von Dritteltönen und Junger Klassizität von Bühnen und Bauten und anschließenden Bezierken. Verstreute Aufzeichnungen von Ferruccio Busoni. Kritische und kommentierte Neuausgabe herausgegeben von Martina Weindel* (Wilhelmshaven, 2006), 95.

⁴² Hinton observes a kind of reverse Anxiety of Influence given that Weill may have overplayed the teachings of Busoni in his last years (*Stages of Reform*, 42).

⁴³ Hinton and Schebera, eds., ‘Zeitoper’, in *Kurt Weill. Musik und Theater*, 48–50, at 50.

⁴⁴ Weill, Letter to Dr Stellenbosch (14 February 1949). Photocopy from Yale University (box 47, folder 14) at Weill-Lenya Research Center (WLRC).

⁴⁵ Letter to Heinz Jolles (27 May 1949), WLRC Series 40.

⁴⁶ Lydia Goehr, ‘Music and Musicians in Exile: The Romantic Legacy of a Double Life’, in *Driven into Paradise: The Musical Migration from Nazi Germany to the United States*, ed. Reinhold Brinkmann and Christoph Wolff (Berkeley, 1999), 66–91, at 78.

⁴⁷ Nils Grosch, *Die Musik der Neuen Sachlichkeit* (Stuttgart, 1999), 18–19, 161 and 180. Grosch understands the concept of ‘Zeitoper’ less in terms of ‘content-related purpose’ than ‘a basic new orientation and changing modes of action in music theatre’, specifically the ‘transformation into a popular medium that leaves behind the concept of opera and opens itself to the market’. Compare with Susan Cook, *Opera for a New Republic: The Zeitoper of Krenek, Weill and Hindemith* (Ann Arbor, 1988), 101.

⁴⁸ For example, ‘Score for a Play: “Street Scene” Becomes a “Dramatic Musical”’, *New York Times* (5 January 1947).

⁴⁹ Weill arrived in New York in September 1935. In 1947 he reflected: ‘Some of the shows in this form which I wrote in Europe (“The Three Penny Opera”, “Mahogany”, [sic] “The Silver Lake”), indicated that there was a vast, and at that time almost untouched, field for a musical theatre somewhere between opera and musical comedy. Then, a few weeks after my arrival in this country eleven years ago, George Gershwin invited me to an orchestral rehearsal of “Porgy and Bess”. Listening for the first time to that score I discovered that the American theatre was already on the way to the more integrated form of musical that we had begun to attempt in Europe.’ Weill, ‘Score for a Play’.

With Gershwin's death in 1937, it was a German-born composer who carried the mantle of developing the formula for a popular strain of American opera.⁵⁰ Weill was as aware of his innovative role as he was bitter about the commercial success of conventional musicals. 'So [Richard] Rodgers "is defining a new directive for musical comedy"', he wrote to Lenya after *Carousel* opened in 1945, a month after his Broadway operetta *The Firebrand of Florence* closed after only forty-three performances (*Carousel* would run for 890). 'I always thought I've been doing that – but I must have been mistaken.'⁵¹ As Kim Kowalke has documented, credit went to Rodgers and Hammerstein for ushering in a new era of musical plays with *Oklahoma!* in 1943, while *Lady in the Dark* had already set a precedent two years previously.⁵²

Oklahoma! would hit a box office record with 2,248 performances by 1948, compared with only 777 for *Lady in the Dark* in 1941.⁵³ The musical play nevertheless provided Weill with his first commercial success in the USA.⁵⁴ He had laboured to adapt his style to the demands of Broadway. The song 'My Ship', which provided a germ for the entire score, evolved from a highly chromatic 'valse lente' to a rocking duple-time rhythm, going through five different drafts until the composer was satisfied.⁵⁵ The score nevertheless maintains vestiges of the idiosyncratic blend of classical European and popular American idioms that characterises his pre-exile works. In the final four bars of 'My Ship', Weill moves through a reconciliatory chorale figure recalling Mendelssohn to bluesy syncopated rhythms before landing on a hopeful but ambiguous F major chord with added sixth (see Example 8 below).

Lady in the Dark adopted an experimental form that was novel for Broadway at the time.⁵⁶ As the first musical drama based on psychoanalysis, the stage work influenced not just a range of Broadway shows about psychotherapy but, through the Paramount film version, American cinema.⁵⁷ The score absorbs elements from *Zeitoper*, operetta and musical comedy,⁵⁸ veering with at times filmic cuts between dream sequences and

⁵⁰ I am grateful to Wolfgang Rathert for his insight into this matter.

⁵¹ Kim Kowalke, 'Kurt Weill and the Quest for American Opera', in *Amerikanismus/Americanism/Weill*, ed. Hermann Wolff and Hermann Gottschewski (Schliengen, 2003), 283–301, at 284; Larry Stempel, 'Street Scene and the Enigma of Broadway Opera', 324; and Gisela Schubert, "'Ein Wettlauf'?: Kurt Weill und Richard Rodgers', in *Kurt Weill-Symposium. Das musikdramatische Werk. Zum 100. Geburtstag und 50. Todestag*, ed. Manfred Angerer, Carmen Ottner, and Eike Rathgeber (Vienna, 2004), 79–89, at 79.

⁵² Kowalke, 'Theorizing the Golden Age Musical', 137 and 147. Also Kim Kowalke, 'Formerly German: Kurt Weill in America', in *A Stranger Here Myself. Kurt Weill-Studien*, ed. Horst Edler and Kim Kowalke (Hildesheim, 1993), 35–57, at 50.

Gisela Schubert writes that if Weill and Rodgers were both innovators in American musical theatre of the 1940s, Rodgers did not transcend the boundaries of the genre, while Weill was motivated by formal experimentation (Schubert, "'Ein Wettlauf'?", 86–7).

⁵³ Bruce D. McClung, 'Introduction', in *Lady in the Dark: A Musical Play in Two Acts*, ed. Bruce D. McClung and Elmar Juchem, book by Moss Hart, music and lyrics by Kurt Weill and Ira Gershwin, series I, vol. 16 (New York, 2017), 13–34, at 25.

⁵⁴ The show also provided a breakthrough for lyricist Ira Gershwin, book writer Moss Art and actors Danny Kaye and Macdonald Carey; McClung, 'Introduction', 25.

⁵⁵ Bruce D. McClung, 'American dreams: Analyzing Moss Hart, Ira Gershwin, and Kurt Weill's "Lady in the Dark"' (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 1995), 372–420. Also David Drew, *Kurt Weill: A Handbook* (Berkeley, 1987), 83.

⁵⁶ McClung, 'Introduction', 20; Kowalke, 'Theorizing the Golden Age Musical', 147, and 'Formerly German', 50.

⁵⁷ Hinton, *Stages of Reform*, 295–6; McClung, 'Introduction', 26–7. Examples range from Elmer Rice's play *Dream Girls* to Hitchcock's *Spellbound*, according to McClung, who writes that *Lady in the Dark* 'ushered in a period of therapeutically astute movie psychiatrists with the ability to effect a cathartic cure after the resurrection of repressed trauma from childhood'. Gisela Schubert takes a slightly different view when she notes the precedent of Rodgers' *Peggy Ann*, which includes dream fantasies, and other American shows in which psychiatry is a theme. New, for her, was the 'seriousness with which Moss Hart treated the topic' (Schubert, "'Ein Wettlauf'?", 84–5).

⁵⁸ Hinton calls *Lady in the Dark* 'a prime example of the kind of mixed genre that Weill cultivated throughout his life': Stephen Hinton, 'Lady in the Dark as Musical Talking Cure', *The Opera Quarterly* 31/1–2 (2015), 134–44, at 135 and 143.

the everyday life of the female protagonist as she struggles to reconcile her professional and private personas in therapy sessions with Dr Brooks. Her three dreams are structured by dance rhythms (rhumba, bolero and march) that both create formal cohesiveness and comment ironically on the drama.⁵⁹ In what Bernstein may have perceived as 'slick', Weill also creates transitions through the most sparse of instrumentation. Both Copland and the conductor Bruno Walter were reportedly astonished at the shifts from realistic scenes to dreams upon discovering that a single clarinet underscores Liza when she hums the tune from the song 'My Ship' at the opening of the 'Glamour Dream'.⁶⁰

Over the course of therapy, Liza hums fragments until she recalls the number in its entirety. As McClung writes, song itself becomes a meta-dramatic thread: 'when Liza is finally able to remember a childhood song and the traumatic events tied to it, her psychosis comes to light, and her complicated love life straightens itself out'.⁶¹ The recovered memory coincides with her realisation that she does not want to marry the magazine publisher Kendall Nesbitt, with whom she has been having an affair, or the movie star Randy Curtis, but rather the advertising manager Charley Johnson.⁶²

Analysis

The influence of *Lady in the Dark* on *Trouble in Tahiti* has been documented in passing yet not explored through detailed analysis. Richard Rischar has undertaken the most extensive comparative discussion thus far, citing both the topic of psychotherapy in *Lady in the Dark* and the critique of suburbia in *One Touch of Venus* as evidence of 'Weill's theatrical influence on Bernstein'.⁶³ Andreas Jaensch writes that *Trouble in Tahiti* evokes the tradition of *Zeitoper*, for which Weill was a chief representative, but most of all takes a cue from his Broadway works and, in particular, *Lady in the Dark*. He also notes the 'central role' of Weill's *Songstil*.⁶⁴ Helen Smith, on other hand, concludes that both *Trouble in Tahiti* and *The Cradle Will Rock* 'combine the influence of *Die Dreigroschenoper* with the structure of Broadway shows'.⁶⁵

Both *Lady in the Dark* and *Trouble in Tahiti* reveal how societal demands are thwarting the protagonist's quest for stability. Within the setting that blurs dream and reality, filmic ideals and mundane truths, the dichotomy between the inner life of the female protagonist and the external allure of cinema creates a dramaturgical thread.⁶⁶ *Trouble in Tahiti* also to some extent makes song a meta-dramatic topic. But while *Lady in the Dark* juxtaposes Liza's musical unconscious with extended passages of spoken dialogue, Bernstein exploits disparate musical idioms to lay bare the dichotomy between the unhappiness of both Sam and Dinah and external expectations set by society. Their exchanges in chromatic recitative are framed by an ironically saccharine vocal trio mixing jazz and swing elements that comments in the manner of a Greek chorus.⁶⁷

In 'I Was Standing in a Garden', the accompaniment dominated by strings creates a dreamy atmosphere, while the doubling of her melody by the first violin lends a sense

⁵⁹ McClung, 'Introduction', 18.

⁶⁰ McClung, 'American dreams', 444–5.

⁶¹ McClung, 'Introduction', 13.

⁶² McClung, 'Introduction', 15 and 20.

⁶³ Richard Rischar, 'Dashed Utopian Suburban Dreams in Leonard Bernstein's *Trouble in Tahiti*', in *Street Scene. Der urbane Raum im Musiktheater des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Jürgen Schebera and Stefan Weiss (Munster, 2006), 101–19, at 112.

⁶⁴ Jaensch, *Leonard Bernsteins Musiktheater*, 209.

⁶⁵ Smith, *There's a Place For Us*, 47.

⁶⁶ *Lady in the Dark* originally included a 'Hollywood Dream' in which Liza imagines married life with Randy Curtis (McClung, 'Introduction', 17).

⁶⁷ Jaensch, *Leonard Bernsteins Musiktheater*, 184.

of empathy with her emotional world. Although the score indicates ‘simply’ and the tessitura lies mid-range, the 1958 recording featuring Beverly Wolff, included two years ago in DG’s *Bernstein Complete Works*, creates a sense of operatic melodrama.⁶⁸ The music begins in G minor and lands in G major for the refrain. In the dream, Dinah hears the voice of her father, then that of a singer, who lures her into a ‘shining garden’. The whole-tone clash of C and D that permeates the number creates an assimilative allusion to the opening notes of the ‘My Ship’ melody, particularly when it surfaces in the ‘Wedding Dream’ after Randy Curtis has disappeared (Examples 1 and 2).

Example 1. *Trouble in Tahiti*, scene 3. Words and Music by Leonard Bernstein. Copyright © 1953 Amberson Holdings LLC, Leonard Bernstein Music Publishing Company LLC, publisher. Provided courtesy of Boosey & Hawkes Bote & Bock, Berlin.

As McClung writes, ‘the concluding D of the melody creates an ironic major-second dissonance with the chorus’ C pedal and reifies the conflict between Liza’s indecision over her groom and the sentiments of the well wishers at the wedding’.⁶⁹ In Dinah’s song, the repeated clash of C and D similarly creates a sense of emotional ambivalence. The C creates harmonic ambiguity, leading to a compound chord of G minor and C minor, the tonic-subdominant combination that is typical of Weill, on the first instance of the word ‘garden’.⁷⁰ The tension between G and C also underscores Liza at the start of the B section of ‘My Ship’ (Examples 3 and 4).

But while Liza is cured by recalling the childhood song in its entirety, Dinah’s recollection of the dream is interrupted by a fade-out to Sam’s office. Her delicate sound world of strings, harp and flute cedes to the restless woodwind motive that first surfaces in scene 2 when Sam answers the telephone.⁷¹ The cut back to reality recalls scenes in *Lady in the Dark* such as the transition from ‘The Princess of Pure Delight’ to the Allure office, at which point a new idiom of accented pentatonic chords enters (bar 385 in the critical edition⁷²), although in this case Liza’s office is still part of the ‘Wedding Dream’.

⁶⁸ Deutsche Grammophon GmbH, Berlin, 2018, 482 8228. Jaensch has noted that the number is a mix of AABA song form and aria (*Leonard Bernsteins Musiktheater*, 191).

⁶⁹ McClung, ‘Psicosi per musica: Re-examining *Lady in the Dark*’, in *A Stranger Here Myself*, 260.

⁷⁰ Ian Kemp calls ‘bitonality involving both tonic and subdominant’ a ‘typical instance’ in Weill’s harmonic environment, citing as examples its occurrence in *Die Dreigroschenoper*, *Der Jasager* and *Die Sieben Todsünden*, but noting that ‘numerous examples of the minor subtonic relationship could be cited’; ‘Harmony in Weill: Some Observations’, *Tempo* 104 (1973), 11–15, at 14.

⁷¹ Jaensch calls it the ‘frustration’ motive but it could just as easily be designated the ‘office’ motive (*Leonard Bernsteins Musiktheater*, 189–90).

⁷² McClung and Elmar, eds., *Lady in the Dark*.

285 **Lento** (♩=♩)
(Randy Curtis disappears)

LIZA *p*
 Ah (free)

Soprano *p* new. *pp*
 Hm

Alto *p* *pp*
 Hm

Tenor *p* *pp*
 Hm

Bass *p* *pp*
 Hm

p *dim.* *pp*

Example 2. *Lady in the Dark*, II. Wedding Dream, 'This Is New'. Music by Kurt Weill, words by Ira Gershwin. Copyright © 1941 (Renewed) Ira Gershwin Music and TRO-Hampshire House Publishing Corp. All Rights for Ira Gershwin Music Administered by WC Music Corp.

1 **Andante mosso** ♩=69
 Dinah *mp* (simply)

I was stand-ing in a gar-den A gar-den gone to seed,

p

Example 3. *Trouble in Tahiti*, scene 3.

31 **allargando**

in. I can wait the years Till it ap- pears One fine day one spring, But the

Example 4. *Lady in the Dark*, IV. Childhood Dream, 'My Ship'.

In *Trouble in Tahiti*, after Sam tries to clear the air with his secretary, with whom he has apparently flirted, the scene returns to the psychiatrist's office. Dinah is recalling the desire she felt for a handsome stranger in her dream. Like Liza, she is confronted with three different men: her husband, with whom she is caught in a loveless marriage; her father, the incarnation of authority; and a young attractive stranger who in the end 'vanished like smoke'. As Dinah weeps, the full orchestra reiterates the main melody of 'I Was Standing in a Garden'. Not unlike Liza, who breaks out into violent tears while at the office, she collects herself and reassures herself through song, returning to the refrain in unison with the flute and first violin.

With the entrance of scene 4, in which Dinah and Sam run into each other on the street, the melody from her dream is carried in the oboe and set to a 3/4 time *Tempo di 'Gymnopédie'* of rocking chords in the clarinets, bassoon and harp (Example 5). The indication of 'Gymnopédie' creates a foreground allusion to Satie, whose iconic three piano works *Gymnopédies* are based on the same staggered, lilting chord patterns in 3/4 time. By placing the title in quotes, Bernstein seems to acknowledge his borrowing from the composer. The technique, meanwhile, creates a lineage back to Weill: the change of mood through a new rhythmic, or gestic, fixing of the melody is key to the formal structure of *Lady in the Dark*.⁷³ Examples include the rumba setting of 'Girl of the Moment' in the 'Glamour Dream', which will be analysed below, and the *Tempo I (Bolero)* at Reh. F of the 'Wedding Dream', in which the chorus sings a variation on its original chorale melody (Example 6).

Bernstein brings more of an operatic touch than the precursor, however, as Sam and Dinah sing recitative-like lines in counterpoint to the 'Garden' melody. Dinah expresses hope of finding peace when her melody falls into synchrony with the oboe on the line 'see you tonight', in C major (bars 501–2). Sam repeats the line but without the support of the orchestra, and the 'Garden' melody that continues in the flute and oboe is soon overtaken by stormy, minor harmonies as Sam, and then Dinah, ask themselves, 'Why did I have to lie?' The 'Garden' melody will continue to underscore them in fragmented variations before bringing the scene to a close with a full iteration in the strings and winds after Sam and Dinah ask, 'can't we find the way back to the garden where we began?' But the promise of a new start is subsequently undermined by an interlude of the vocal trio, which sarcastically sings, 'Lovely life: Happily married.'

⁷³ In his essay 'Über den gestischen Charakter der Musik', Weill explains that it is in the 'rhythmic fixing of the text' that the 'gestic means of the music' expresses itself most clearly, while the melody 'swings' above the accompaniment (Kurt Weill. *Musik und Theater*, 64–6, at 65–6). For a further analysis of what Weill meant by 'rhythmic fixing', see Kim Kowalke, *Kurt Weill in Europe* (Ann Arbor, 1980), 118.

(Dinah is in the street, stage-right. She looks up and sees that it is raining, she opens her umbrella and proceeds slowly across the stage. Sam enters, stage-left, also with umbrella. They meet slightly right of center.)

1 **Tempo di "Gymnopédie"** ♩ = 84 (Sam enters)

9 **1** **Dinah** *mp*
 (They look up, embarrassed.) I'm on my way to lunch with Su-sie.

Sam *mp*
 Well, of all peo-ple.

Example 5. *Trouble in Tahiti*, scene 4.

85 **Tempo I (Bolero)** (♩ = 60) *ALL p*

85 *ALL* land. And now a Ma-ple-ton High girl is to be

87 mar-ried. Li - za Ell-iott is mar-ry-ing Ken - dall

Example 6. *Lady in the Dark*, II. Wedding Dream, 'Mapleton High Choral'.

The trio's commentary creates a parallel with choral interludes in the 'Wedding Dream'. The 'Mapleton High Chorale', in particular, parodies societal conventions in which the American dream is blindly pursued and true happiness subjugated to the semblance of success: 'for our school we'll do or we'll die / And reach the goal of victory'. When the topic of marriage comes up, a bolero rhythm enters, on a chord of C minor with added sixth (see [Example 6](#)). Trumpets, trombone and tuba underscore the orchestra's mocking quality. Swinging thirds enter in the clarinets upon the mention of Kendall Nesbitt, the magazine publisher who has finally decided to divorce his wife for Liza, when in fact she realises that she does not want to settle down with him. 'They should be very happy', comments the chorus sarcastically.

The bolero rhythm comes to a full stop with a B minor added-sixth chord dominated by open trumpets and trombone when a man announces, 'and now they're buying the ring'. When the rhythm re-enters with the appearance of the jeweller, it is the vehicle for an ironic funeral procession, thumping in the tom-tom, piano and Hammond organ beneath sardonic brass and woodwinds. 'Shall it be with emeralds? Or shall it be with diamonds?' taunts the chorus as the clarinets and trumpets slide upwards and downwards on a chromatic melody. The bolero rhythm disappears upon the entrance of the movie star Randy Curtis (at Reh. H), who entices Liza with the false promise of becoming a glamour girl.

In the 'Glamour Dream', dance rhythms serve to both escalate her fantasy and mock the situation. The song 'Girl of the Moment' first emerges as a foxtrot and – after a marine sits down to paint Liza's portrait at the request of the President of the United States – as a chorale-like *Larghetto religioso*. She has been whisked away to a nightclub, where patrons sing in praise of her beauty. Once the portrait is revealed to be unflattering, however, the crowd begins to taunt her ('What is Liza really like?'), and the chorus returns as a rumba *molto agitato* replete with rumba drums and jeering saxophones. As McClung has documented, the rhythm not only takes on a mocking function but 'the first violins' and piccolo's ascending runs and trills create a distorted hilarity, as if the orchestra itself is giddy and laughing at Liza'.⁷⁴

In *Trouble in Tahiti*, single instruments within the transparent scoring similarly create ironic counterpoint to the drama. In scene 6, as Dinah complains about the quality of a superficial Hollywood film to an imaginary milliner at a hat shop, the woodwinds, strings and xylophone shadow her declamatory recitative. A new fast-paced dance enters at Reh. 4 as she sings of the protagonist, a princess from the South Pacific, meeting 'the handsome American'.⁷⁵ Sarcastic piccolo flourishes and the xylophone glissando at Reh. 8 have a taunting quality. At Reh. 11, she struggles to remember the melody from the scene in question, 'a ballad of South Sea romance': 'I wish I could think of it: Da da de da ... Oh, a beautiful song!' Just as she remembers 'Island Magic', at Reh. 13, a new swanky, tango-like rhythm enters. As with Liza, the recollection of a song opens the path to sexual self-determination.

Commentary on American politics is also a steady undercurrent in this scene, reflecting the protagonist's frustration. At Reh. 18, a sarcastic march enters as Dinah sings of the US Navy, with a racing xylophone that ironically contradicts the text at Reh. 19 when she sings 'Everything now is cleared up and wonderful'. The instrument only stops when she sings 'Island Magic of course', the orchestra providing an ironically false sense of resolution. Soon thereafter, at Reh. 21, begins the Beguine, signalling Dinah's complete immersion in fantasy. Rischar has already noted this 'parallel or source of influence' in *Lady in the Dark* through 'the "covering" of a "hit single" as a faster, more rhythmic rumba'.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ McClung, 'American dreams', 352.

⁷⁵ Jaensch notes that the song is structured by 'three different levels of reality', evolving from recitative, to description of the plot, to 'incidental music' including the rumba song (*Leonard Bernsteins Musiktheater*, 198).

⁷⁶ Rischar, 'Dashed Utopian Suburban Dreams', 115.

The added-sixth harmonies that are prominent in ‘The Saga of Jenny’ and ‘My Ship’ now fill the music.⁷⁷ The F major added-sixth chord under ‘palm trees’ could even create a contrastive allusion to the chord that ends ‘My Ship’, as Dinah will ultimately not find true love (Examples 7 and 8).

21 **Beguine** (*a bit broader than before*)

1000 *sempre ff*

Trio (off-stage, on mike)
MAG- IC!! Where the palm trees whis- per to - geth- er, And it's

Girl *f* **Sva ad lib.* *p*
Ah, Ah,

Boy 1 *f* *p*
Ah, Ah,

Boy 2 *f* *p*
Ah, Ah,

f *mp*

Example 7. *Trouble in Tahiti*, scene 6.

Like Liza in the ‘Glamour Dream’, Dinah has entered a realm where she can experience an idealised romance which is denied her in everyday life.⁷⁸ The vocal trio sings in unison with her as she sings of ‘Island Magic’, and the percussion underscores her when she exclaims ‘And I simply cannot believe / It really is mine!’. Her fantasy about becoming the beautiful female character in the film might even invite comparison to Liza’s dream of making love to Randy Curtis. But while Liza has a date with the movie star in real life, Dinah’s escape is nothing more than a chimera. The song does not belong to her, and going to the movies has ultimately not been therapeutic. She and the trio cannot finish the word ‘magic’ when Dinah ‘comes to her senses’ and the *Tempo primo* returns, at

⁷⁷ Weill insisted that the added-sixth chords were a result of voice leading despite their prevalence in popular music. Foster Hirsch, *Kurt Weill on Stage: From Berlin to Broadway* (New York, 2000), 306–7.

⁷⁸ Jaensch writes that Dinah identifies with the South Sea beauty and dreams of love in paradise (*Leonard Bernsteins Musiktheater*, 199).

49 **allargando** (slow)

al - so bring my own true love to me.

dim.

p

pp

Ped. *

Example 8. *Lady in the Dark*, IV. Childhood Dream, 'My Ship'.

Reh. 25. She comes full circle and laments the movie in recitative. The final chord overlaying D minor and C minor reveals that she is still trapped in ambivalence.

In the final scene, she and Sam sit by the fire in what the libretto tells us 'looks like domestic bliss, but feels awful'. Not unlike in the taunting bolero of the 'Wedding Dream' in *Lady in the Dark*, percussion and brass comment on the situation. The percussion underscoring the vocal trio evolves from cymbal and bass drum to thumping timpani at Reh. 2 on the words 'evening pleasures', creating the undercurrent of a Mahlerian funeral march. A rising motive of trumpet doubled by clarinet and flute remarks with ironic distance, transforming the upbeat jazz instrument into a symbol of both leisure and mourning. When the couple is reduced to dialogue for the first time, at Reh. 8, it is as if the soundtrack of the now forlorn vocal trio has been unplugged.

The music returns only when they have decided to go to the movies. Dinah hides the fact that she has already seen the film in question, repressing her unhappiness and bending to Sam's will in an effort to salvage their marriage. A bittersweet solo violin picks up the melody from Sam's exchange with Dinah at Reh. 17, again commenting on the situation as the couple acknowledges that instead of real love, they are settling for 'bought-and-paid-for magic ... on a Super Silver Screen'. Rather than take the path to self-discovery, as Liza does with the help of her psychiatrist, Dinah avoids confronting her marital problems and settles for Hollywood escapism.

Much as Dinah does not meet with personal fulfilment, *Trouble in Tahiti* only hints at the promise of a future for American opera that reflects on harsh social realities while synthesising popular idioms and modernist rigour. The score is not 'slick' like *Lady in the Dark* but rather creates a montage that ultimately lampoons American culture's indulgence in valueless entertainment. Unlike in *Lady in the Dark*, popular song is not a vehicle for change. 'Island Magic' bears no cure, and the score leans heavily towards melodrama. The 1983 sequel *A Quiet Place*, which begins with Dinah's funeral, would become a full-blown tragedy, pushing the music towards violent dissonance while creating organic unity with *Trouble in Tahiti* by quoting themes in leitmotivic fashion (a revised 1984 version incorporates the first opera into the second act as a flashback). Ultimately, while Weill smoothed over the painful gap between his European past and his American future with *Lady in the Dark*, Bernstein was not afraid to cultivate a contradictory musical idiom in which a multitude of voices had their influence.

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