

The Stage  
4 February  
1960

## GAY BROUGHT UP TO DATE

THE new version of John Gay's "The Beggar's Opera" presented at the Questors, Ealing, last Saturday, has been freely and almost entirely successfully adapted from the original by Barbara Hutchins, Eric Kirby and Vincent McQueen.

Set in Soho in 1960 and dressed accordingly, it serves, among other things, to show how little the underworld has changed in 230 years. Had the adaptors found some means of modernising the part of the theme which deals with the execution and transportation of thieves one would not have been distracted by the occasional anomalies from the complete appreciation of the excellent presentation. The language has been modernised successfully, and the lyrics outstandingly well and very wittily.

The play and its production, which is beautifully done by Barbara Hutchins, with admirable sets by John Rolfe and costumes by Sue Phillips, is vigorous, violent, convincing and at times very funny indeed. It deserves to be more widely seen.

Tony Worth, as Macheath, has all the compelling charm needed for that character, and Denise Huot is excellent as Lucy Lockit. Acting of a high standard comes also from Michael Kennedy as the Beggar, Neville Bradbury as a spiv Peachum, Joan Pyle as Mrs. Peachum and Jennifer Osgard as Polly, and from Philip Wright as Lockit. The Counts, a talented skiffle group, provide excellent accompaniment under the direction of Eric Kirby.

L.G.S.

MCT  
6 Feb  
1960

## BEGGAR'S OPERA WITH A BEAT

**"BANG to rights":** without a doubt. **"A lot of cobblers":** a lot of nonsense. **"Gelt":** cash. **"To give the griff":** to explain procedure. **"Scarpa":** to remove oneself quickly. **"Skint":** broke. What's all this? you may demand. You needn't worry: the M.C.T. drama columns haven't fallen into desuetude and been replaced by a feature on the anomalies and perversions of English grammar. The above are simply some of the more decipherable entries in the glossary of plebian argot with which the Questors thoughtfully embellish the programme of their current production.

Ealing's answer to the French screen's *nouvelle vague*, they cap "Les Liaisons Dangereuses 1960" with "The Beggar's Opera 1960"; though I'm sure John Gay, as freely adapted by Barbara Hutchins, Eric Kirby and Vincent McQueen, would have better luck securing an export licence than Choderos de Laclos in the hands of the initial M. Bardot. The adaptation has its longueurs, in Acts One and Three. But these nearly all derive from the original. And while I sigh at the omission of "Let Us Take the Road"—or, for that matter, the theme from the Brecht-Weill "Dreigroschenoper" more aptly called in such a context by its Satchmo-Darin sobriquet "Mack the Knife"—the remainder of the score proves, like the revel as a whole, an engaging hybrid.

John Rolfe, whose collaboration with Kim Zeigler on the décors and dressing of last year's "Questronics" I was prevented from praising through inadequate footage, sends the curtain up on an atmospheric collage of torn newspapers and a backdrop of Soho lamp-posts and house-tops. Later he makes adroit use of symbolically stylized, mobile props: a gaol gate for Macheath the robber to inhabit, a kitchen sink for Lucy his mistress to slave over. These are pushed into position by the play's beggar-chorus, whom Michael Kennedy incarnates as an archetypal yob, complete with black jeans, striped vest and choker, the haircut of a wop D.A., the profile of a Greek (Nick the Greek), and a faintly adenoidal Cockney accent not surprisingly reminiscent (since Mr. Kennedy is American) of Harry Belafonte's in "The Drummer and the Cook."

### Enter Peachum

Next comes an equally definitive posse of predatory, loose-lipped, convex handbag-swingers, Gay's "ladies of the town" transmuted into bints bent on keeping the Wolfenden from the door; and after them, a Fascist-shirted, razor-slashed, sinisterly equine, slate-voiced ponce of a Peachum (Neville Bradbury), plus Joan Pyle as his wife in ginger curls and mould-green kimono. Miss Pyle's fervent testimony in the role of Ceres ("Ye gods, how I fructified!") was a further happy event from the 1959 revue I found myself unable to mention. I am doubly glad therefore to honour her mordant rendering here of "The Nine O'Clock Walk." Now, finally, the romantic leads appear. Polly Peachum (Jennifer Osgood) has an hour-glass shape plotted in mink, bracelets, slink-skirt and fish-net nylons: her camel-coated hubby Macheath (Tony Worth), a maturely good-looking kosher phiz that might be brother to Sidney Tafler's. And they can sing, too.

Their opening duet "Can Love Be Controlled by Advice?" is helped by an attractive guitar accompaniment from Ray Millham and David Cunliffe, who with John Elson on bass and Colin Robinson on drums form the show's orchestra under the name of the Counts. "My Heart is so Free" allows the couple a chance to dance. Then, in the charming "Over the Hills and Far Away," Barbara Hutchins' directorial presence is felt for the first time; they slowly retreat to opposite sides of the stage, before parting on the title-line with a forlorn mutual wave.

allows the couple a chance to dance. Then, in the charming "Over the Hills and Far Away," Barbara Hutchins' directorial presence is felt for the first time; they slowly retreat to opposite sides of the stage, before parting on the title-line with a forlorn mutual wave.

From this point onwards the Hutchins touch grows more and more palpable. The early scenes of Act Two are the best of the evening, as an endearingly faded barmaid twirling her duster joins a cabal of crooks wearing flop-brim trilbies and dark glasses who are "Rarin' to Go" to the tune of "Lilliburlero," while a rampantly rouged, red-petticoated little Jenny Diver (Dilys Dodd) heads Les Girls in a jam session with Macheath christened "Have Your Fling." ("Expresso Beggaro?"). Nothing that follows quite recaptures the same élan, but there is still a great deal to enjoy: Lucy and Polly exchanging deleterious expletives in "Bubble and Trouble"; the entire gambling den episode with its entwined jive-shufflers and coin-tossers a la George Raft, its feather-tease bizarrely set to "Where the Blue of the Night," its piano honky-tonking "Bei mir bistdu schon," its bleary-eyed bouncer, and its raddled, bedizened madame Di Trancer (Dorinne Ingram), whose "Da-da-da" number has a fine old irony and rhythm.

We return to rock on Lucy's "Revenge" solo, implacably delivered by Denise Huot. ("I have the ratsbane ready," she enlightens us at the end with maidenly innocence). Contemporary death-cell lyrics of "Greensleeves" and "Barbara Allen" climax in a let-off for Macheath and a reprise of "Lilliburlero" by his innumerable pram-clutching "snouses" (one with the nattois of Dietrich, another that of Chita Rivera). Mac and pretty Polly are manacled together for life, and Lucy seeks consolation from the Chorus.

"The Beggar's Opera" runs until February 10. I hope my giving the griff has removed any idea that a modern version must be a lot of cobblers. Unless you're skint, it's well worth your gelt, and bang to rights you'll not want to scarpa in the interval.

DOUGLAS McVAY.



# 1960 "BEGGAR'S OPERA" DOES NOT CONVINCE

## AN ABLE LUCY

By A. V. COTON

THE Questor's Theatre at Ealing has a reputation as one of the liveliest amateur groups in the country. Its freshest novelty is a 1960s version of "The Beggar's Opera," first presented on Saturday.

This adaptation by Barbara Hutchins, Eric Kirby and Vincent McQueen, produced by Miss Hutchins, is a strenuous test of all the company's talents.

It displays the strength of the organisation and also the weakness of a reconstruction job for which there appears to have been no sound architectural plan.

The original was a satire on public complacency and callousness towards the horrors of poverty and the criminal life of London. Shifting it to 1960 costumes and settings isn't quite enough—particularly when most of the dialogue is freshly written and a majority of the original tunes and lyrics are omitted.

### UNREAL VIEW

This version is a good-natured jibe against the supposed present-day corruptions of justice; an unreal view of Soho street life and of the criminal underworld. But the jokes stick in the actors' throats or hang unconvincingly in mid-air.

Nobody on stage, one feels, really believes that to-day's crooks, gaolers and policemen are quite as black as is pretended.

The staging is lively and inventive. There are some excellent individual scenes and effective characterisations, particularly of the male riff-raff. Neville Bradbury made a consistent Peachum, Tony Worth a somewhat hesitant but effective Macheath.

Denise Huot, as Lucy Lockit, was the big surprise of the occasion, a full-bodied characterisation fully realised in acting and singing of a quality rare outside the professional theatre. She might almost have been reincarnated for this occasion from "The Beggar's Opera" of 1728.