MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

THE NEW YORKER

Desperadoes

By Alex Ross (November 23, 2015)

Marlis Petersen has portrayed Lulu in ten productions of the opera.
At the Met, she is at once girlishly innocent and predatory.
CREDIT PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF BROWN FOR THE NEW YORKER

Benjamin Franklin Wedekind, the iconoclastic author of "Spring Awakening" and the Lulu plays, had trouble deciding whether he was German or American. His parents, a gynecologist and a singer, were German expatriates who met and were married in San Francisco, then returned to Germany just before Wedekind was born in 1864. Although he never set foot in America, he purveyed a vaguely American style, going by Frank and adopting a streetwise look. Scholarship suggests that his attitude toward his lost homeland wavered between admiration and contempt: he prized the ideal of a free, open society, yet excoriated the greed and folly to which that society seemed prone. His work remains relevant. The Metropolitan Opera is presenting a new production, by the South African artist William Kentridge, of Alban Berg's 1935 masterpiece "Lulu," while Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik's 2006 musical adaptation of "Spring Awakening" is back on Broadway, in a version by the Los Angeles company Deaf West. In both works, as in the source plays, characters speak of fleeing to America as disaster looms. Countess Geschwitz, Lulu's lesbian friend, proposes that they abscond across the ocean; the flailing schoolboy Moritz Stiefel begs for money to make the trip. America is the final illusion of sinking souls.

Wedekind is celebrated for his unprecedentedly blunt approach to sex. Beginning with "Spring Awakening," which was written in 1891 but not staged until 1906, he addressed teen-age lust, masturbation, same-sex desire, abortion, rape, and Lustmord ("lust murder"). His assaults on bourgeois decorum aside, Wedekind was one of the architects of modern drama, helping to forge Expressionism and definitively influencing Brecht. Savagely realistic dialogue is cut up and shuffled into chilling non sequiturs. Berg preserved this in the libretto that he fashioned from the two Lulu plays, "Earth Spirit" and "Pandora's Box." In Act I, Dr. Schön, the wealthy newspaper editor who cannot resist Lulu's spell, sputters invective: "You angel of death! . . . You hangman's noose!" She blithely answers, "How do you like my new dress?" The "Spring Awakening" musical strays further from its source, but dark chunks of Wedekind remain, notably when the naïve schoolgirl Wendla asks Melchior, the sensitive rebel hero of the piece, to beat her with a switch. His almost instantaneous transformation into a brute screaming "Bitch!" is as frightening now as it was a century ago.

Needless to say, there are huge differences between the two adaptations, and not only where musical language is concerned. Sater and Sheik have framed "Spring Awakening" as a familiar saga of frustrated youth, of lusty adolescents defying repressive parents and despotic teachers. The rock-and-roll flavor of Sheik's score accentuates the show's resemblance to misunderstood-teen-ager narratives of the "Rebel Without a Cause" type. In part, this appropriation is accomplished by way of heavy-handed revision; in the original, Melchior rapes Wendla, whereas in the musical the sex is consensual, almost sacred. But to present "Spring Awakening" as an ode to a nascent youth culture hardly betrays the text. Wedekind, who sang in cabarets, accompanying himself on guitar, might not have entirely hated this punchy, all-American take on his play.

The Deaf West production—which is playing at the Brooks Atkinson and is directed by Michael Arden—pairs singer-actors with deaf performers who communicate via American Sign Language. As a result, the musical gains unexpected force. The easy spectacle of attractive young people dashing about the stage gives way to something more fraught and elemental, as the signing performers hold their own against the singing ones. The most wrenching moment is silent, as Moritz, played by Daniel N. Durant, prepares to commit

suicide. He signs lines based on Wedekind, as supertitles appear behind him: "Ten minutes ago, you could see the entire horizon. Now, only the dusk. The first few stars. So dark." His existential solitude is at once particular and universal: it invites sympathy for all outcasts.

The Wedekind who wrote the Lulu plays, in a fitful process that lasted from 1892 until 1913, had rid himself of all sentimentality. Although embers of innocence still glow in "Spring Awakening"—notably, in the remarkable scene between the smitten schoolboys Hans and Ernst—in Lulu's realm love leads inevitably to catastrophe. She mesmerizes a string of men and women, most of whom meet bad ends. Her nemesis arrives in the person of Jack the Ripper—a scene that has not lost its capacity to appall, even after a thousand slasher films. The eternal term-paper question is whether Lulu is being presented as the victim of a male-dominated society or whether her sexuality is being misogynistically blamed for all the mayhem. One can find evidence for both readings, and Wedekind's conception of the character changed as he struggled to accommodate censorship and bring the plays to the stage. The fundamental idea, which is reflected in Kentridge's production of "Lulu," is that she becomes a screen onto which her admirers project conflicting images. The story begins with the painting of her portrait, and, to the artist's frustration, her expression cannot be fixed.

Berg, one of many fin-de-siècle German and Austrian youths who were spellbound by Wedekind's plays, felt no obligation to clean up the material. He made drastic cuts as he assembled the libretto, but they only heighten the impact. Indeed, they result in brilliant new bits of grotesquerie. In Act I, dialogue involving Lulu's first husband, Dr. Goll, is hacked away, leaving the poor man with only three words: "You dogs!— You . . . " He has discovered Lulu in the arms of the Painter, and falls dead of a heart attack. When "Spring Awakening" finally reached the stage, Wedekind complained that it was being treated too solemnly. Berg's "Lulu" is a work of daunting complexity and crushing intensity that also succeeds in being funny. At the Met, laughter repeatedly rippled through the house, the mounting horrors notwithstanding.

Still, Berg couldn't help remaking "Lulu" in his own image. Although he employs a host of modern devices—not only Schoenberg's twelve-tone method but also hints of cabaret, ragtime, jazz, and Kurt Weill—the dominant presence is a kind of supersaturated crypto-Romanticism that sounds, as Theodor Adorno once said of Berg's music, like Mahler and Schoenberg played simultaneously. That description particularly applies to the grandly yearning themes that Berg wrote for the love of Dr. Schön and Lulu and for Lulu's reverie of freedom. There is no counterpart to these outbursts in Wedekind. Likewise, at the very end of "Pandora's Box" Geschwitz declares that she will be with Lulu through all eternity; then she exclaims, as she dies, "O verflucht!" ("Damn it!"). Irony flattens her lofty sentiment. Berg is too much the Romantic to surrender the hope of infinite longing. He drops the exclamation and lets Geschwitz's rhapsodic lines float into the ether, even as a fateful heartbeat rhythm sounds in the orchestra.

The old Met production of "Lulu," by John Dexter, served the opera beautifully for years, exuding a decrepit, off-kilter splendor. I felt a certain trepidation when Kentridge was announced as the director of the new "Lulu," since his previous Met staging, of Shostakovich's "The Nose," struck me as visually dazzling but psychologically inert. There is no opera more psychological than "Lulu." The early scenes don't bode well, as Kentridge

sets in motion a busy array of projections: newsprint, dictionary entries, Rorschach inkblots, videos of a hand making brushstrokes, woodcuts of early-twentieth-century German and Austrian figures (including one of Berg). Meanwhile, two mime figures, a pianist and a butler, execute rubbery contortions onstage. At first, the singers seem lost in the mix, doing little more than gesturing and standing in place. Later in the opera, though, the collages find dramatic purpose. As the images cascade over walls and partitions, they create flickering, filmic spaces in which the action can unfold. We are led into an unstable dream world where identity is in constant flux. Especially striking is the treatment of Lulu's death: brushstrokes obliterate a woodcut of her face, suggesting the splattering of blood. We see the blotting out of the woman who has always been captive to men's images of her.

The German soprano Marlis Petersen, a great Mozart singer, has performed in ten productions of "Lulu." She has announced that this will be her last, and she is going out in high, gaudy style. On opening night, she kicked her legs and leaped about on furniture with an alacrity that would have suited the athletics of "Spring Awakening." At the same time, she gave a precise, lyrically pulsing account of the vocal part. Her Lulu is at once girlishly innocent and predatory, reflecting Wedekind's equivocation. Matching her in energy was the Austrian bass-baritone Martin Winkler, who plays the Animal Trainer and also the acrobat Rodrigo. Flapping his arms, slapping his bald head and his exposed paunch, Winkler brought a vaudeville menace to the proceedings, entirely in the Wedekind spirit. Johan Reuter, as Dr. Schön, and Daniel Brenna, as his son Alwa, might have benefitted from more decisive direction, but both sang with clarity and vigor. Paul Groves was a strained but potent Painter. The veteran baritone Franz Grundheber gave unusual heft to Lulu's ancient friend Schigolch; Susan Graham brought unusual lustre to Geschwitz.

James Levine had been announced as the conductor of this production, but he withdrew earlier this fall. Lothar Koenigs, who is the music director of the Welsh National Opera, has stepped in for the first five performances (including the Live in HD broadcast, on November 21st), and on opening night he elicited a fresh, lucid, convulsive account of the score. Levine habitually emphasized the Wagnerian-Mahlerian aspect; Koenigs muted some of the lushness, focussing on incisive rhythm and songful phrasing. Berg's sublime monster of a score became an unexpectedly lithe creature, almost musical-theatre-like in passing moments. It packed a monumental wallop all the same.

Koenigs was not always perfectly faithful to the score. Among other things, he altered the dynamics of those chords of fate in the final bars. In the "Lulu" score, the brass is marked mezzo forte and the percussion is marked piano; here we got a grimly roaring sound, with a deadly thud to close. But the change brought us closer to the source—to Wedekind's pitiless vision of humanity, which, more than a century on, we still have trouble looking in the face.