

The Beggar's Opera

By John Gay

Research by Chris VanHorn

The Beggar's Opera by John Gay premiered on January 29th 1728 at Lincoln's Inn Fields with much popularity in the city of London. It did an impressive run of 62 performances in its first season and was subsequently reproduced every season in the London theatre for the remainder of the century. Its popularity still exists today as it is one of the most frequently performed English Operas. In 1920 Frederic Austin arranged for a performance at the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith; a performance which would run for a staggering 1,463 nights(Hume,2). The Beggars Opera is a social satire which in its own right pioneered the English Balled Opera, as its form was distinguished and unique from any operatic work that came before it. It consists of 69 songs mostly short Airs interspersed between spoken dialogues, a technique that had not yet been employed in the operatic theatre. Our poet John Gay picked popular tunes of the time to set his lyrical prose to, this probably contributed a great bit to the Operas popularity as the general audience was familiar with these French, Irish, and Scottish folk tunes with an equal mix of traditional English ballads. The impact it had on the London theatre was unprecedented and the phenomenon spread outside the theatre with a pirated performance just weeks after the conclusion of the first season, the first time any theatrical piece was pirated(Hume, 5). Striking a note of similarity it is a timeless opera poking fun at the

shallows of life, love, money, marriage and the moral decay and corruption amongst men and women alike.

Before engaging in the works of *The Beggars Opera* let us first take a look at its creator, English playwright and poet, John Gay. The details surrounding the early life of Gay are sparse, few and far between. There is very little accurate documentation surrounding his life until about the year 1713 when he dedicated one of his works *Rural Sports* to friend and colleague Alexander Pope (Irving 4). His Association with the already famous Pope may have contributed to more abundant resources documenting his life in an Aristocratic community. Some facts do exist about Gay and his family. It is known that John Gay's great grandfather Anthony Gay established the family seat in Barnstaple, North Devon, England, somewhere around the year 1602. Anthony Gay became a wealthy man upon marrying Elizabeth Beaple, the daughter of the wealthiest man in Barnstaple. Among this newly acquired wealth were several properties that trickled down through the Gay generations including the house where John Gay was eventually born in on June 30 1685 (Irving 6). As previously stated there is little known of John's earlier years but some church records indicate he was baptized on September 16th 1685. It is assumed he lived a fairly comfortable and normal childhood as his family had a bit of inherited wealth and Gay was a common and well respected name in the community. An interesting artifact was discovered in 1882 as the church in Barnstaple was being remodeled, a church pew was removed containing the vandalistic graffiti of a young Gay who carved "John Gay 1695" in the back of the pew (Irving 7). Carved at the age of ten this may have been a sign of angst suffered from a ten year old orphan having lost his parents both in the year before. His mother passed first causing great grief and

distress in the family, which suffered another blow, only months later when John's father passed as well. Ten year old John and his siblings, the oldest sister having 19 years of age, were taken in by their Uncle Thomas Gay who raised the children and saw to the proper schooling of John at a local grammar school. John received his education at St. Ann's Chantry in the back of the Barnstaple church. Under the direction of school master Reverend Robert Luck, John would be influenced in the art of prose and music. Reverend Luck instated an annual grammar school play which was performed by the students. For the most part John received a well rounded education which exposed him to many great literary works. After finishing school John took to a brief apprenticeship at his cousins lace shop in London in the year 1706 but quit and returned to Barnstaple for a short period before returning to London at the assistance of his childhood friend and school mate Aaron Hill, who was becoming a mildly successful playwright and publisher gaining a respectable social position in London. Gay assisted Hill in his various ventures during the years 1708-1711. This association gave Gay a window into the Aristocratic society of London and also saw to the publishing of his first works as well as exposing him to other literary pioneers of the time. Through friends and acquaintances John found himself at the position of his first real line of employment as he was appointed as the secretary to the Duchess of Monmouth in 1712(Bear 2). Here John built a solid reputation and became increasingly productive in his literary works as the position allowed him financial security and a fair amount of free time to devote to his personal work. These years gave us some of Gay's more notable works such as *The wife Of Bathe*, *The Fan* and of course *Rural Sports* dedicated to Pope. John returned to London around the year 1714 and found himself part of a club of literary analysts and writers called *The Great*

Scriblerus Club. Here John joined the collaborative efforts of good friends Pope and Jonathan Swift. Several works came of the group including a weekly news letter called *The Works of The Unlearned*, which aimed at critically ridiculing any works of the time which were deserving of praise (Irving 96). This time period also gave us *The Shepherds Week*, a pastoral couplet which alternates between a satirical mockery and a sweet notion of seriousness, a trait which becomes more and more common in the works of Gay. Over the following years Gay experienced mild success here and there but nothing of much notoriety and eventually he ran into financial complications which left him near broke. Gay made and lost a fortune in the South Sea Stocks, which left him near broke in the year of 1720. This sent Gay into a period of depression which he revived from within the interest of the theatre. Also about this time Sir Robert Walpole took to office and would become the target of satire in Gays yet to be written *The Beggars Opera*. Gay himself was appointed head of state lotteries, a position which he remained at practically until his death in 1732. The stirring inspiration for *The Beggars Opera* began with a suggestion by Gays close friend Jonathan Swift to “do a Newgate Pastoral among the whores and thieves there” (Hume) and suggestions of another friend to indulge in his satirical nature for a successful employment. These ideas would sit in the back of Gays mind for a few more years while the city of London began to sink slowly into despair. Gangs of men began to make a presence in the city and thievery became a booming business. One such gangster, Joseph Blake had been arrested at the instigation of Jonathan Wild, who was comparatively similar to that of Al Capone. The trial gained much attention especially that of Gay who would find his inspiration for the character Peachum in *The Beggars Opera*. Gay wrote a ballad which depicted the results of Blakes trial and how he tried to

kill Jonathan Wild during the trial(Irving 203). The seeds of inspiration had been sewn and in 1727 Gay wrote to his friend and colleague Swift telling him that he was going to Newgate to get the proper local color for an opera which he had already completed, this was in fact *The Beggars Opera* (Irving 204-207). The birth of The Beggars Opera certainly came from the state of London in which Gay found himself facing unfair political prejudices at the hand of Sir Robert Walpole who is portrayed in the characters of Peachum and Lockit but especially in the main character Macheath. The success of the Beggars Opera would boost Gay's popularity and recover financial stability for the writer. He would go on to write a sequel to the Beggars Opera called Polly which was never performed but took an even harsher attack at Walpole and the English government. Gay would continue with an unsuccessful venture in Ballad Operas the form which he invented and established. Performed in 1728 The Beggars Opera was Gay's first and last real success, it set the standard for musicals as we know them and launched a moderately and otherwise less notable character of English literary history into immortality. Well his name became immortalized at least as he would pass a few years later in December of 1732 of bowel inflammation. His body was buried at Westminster Abbey and on his tombstone a famous quote which is now associated directly with his name, "Life is a jest; and all things show it. I thought so once; but now I know it." A phrase commonly quoted by Gay through out his life, works and letters. It suits most appropriately his character, the way he viewed the world and the theme to his legendary masterpiece(Gordon 1).

With The Beggars Opera completed and ready for performance Gay set off to find a theatre to run the show. He first approached Colly Cibber head of productions at Drury Lane, whose productions were mostly successful with the public and had a reputation that

could afford to experiment with Gay's work(Bear 5). However Cibber declined the opportunity and sent Gay away, nervous about his political targets in the satire and finding little virtue in the moral corruption of the characters. Across town however, Gay's opera would receive more enthusiastic praise from John Rich, head of productions at Lincoln's Inn Fields. Rich, who seemed more concerned about a competitive rivalry with Drury Lane and more impressed by Gays associates and the Aristocratic community he surrounded himself in, than the play itself, secured insuring expenses from the Duchess of Queensberry and had nothing to lose(Bear 3). And so the Opera premiered with immediate controversy as Gay risked his reputation and livelihood over the audience's perception of its satirical nature. Taking an obvious aim at The Royal Academy of Music and Italian Opera in its many allusions to Handel, though these weren't intended to be hostile towards Handel and were not likely received that way. Although Gay does stride to make a mockery of Handel's rivalry between sopranos Faustina and Cuzzoni, from *Alessandro*, using the characters Lucy and Polly in *The Beggars Opera*. Whores and thieves danced about the stage portraying the very immoral decay that existed right outside the theatre and probably within the lives of much of the audience. An astonishing theatrical twist, never had such a piece been performed on stage and the irony in its popular reception only fueled its guises. It glorified the lack of morals and the honor among thieves, it is even said that this opera had an influence on the mannerisms of actual thieves who became better spoken and carried their thievery with pride. Gay glorified these ideas of moral decay and its amusing manner "giving to thieves and whores in burlesque the manners of fine lords and ladies."(Irving 247). The opera amused as well as confused the audience in its premiere edition, introducing the

Ballad Opera first to London and then the rest of the English world. Consisting of 45 shuffled scenes with equal speech and song amongst the three acts it is not much of an opera at all so much as it is a play, or a musical.

The introduction is an amusing dialogue between The Beggar and the Player. The Beggar begins by explaining his opera to the Player; here Gay takes an opportunity through the beggar to explain himself to the audience, and even apologizes for the informality of the piece. The Beggar: "I hope I may be forgiven, that I have not made my opera throughout unnatural, like those in vogue; for I have no Recitative: Expecting this, as I have consented to have neither Prologue nor Epilogue, it must be allow'd an Opera in all its forms."(Gaypg2) He uses the player to relate to the audience and reassure them about the "merit" of the Gay himself, The Player: "As we live by the muses, 'tis but Gratitude in us to encourage Poetical Merit where-ever we find it. The muses...pay no distinction to dress, and never partially mistake the pertness of embroidery for Wit, nor the Modesty of Want for dullness. Be The author who he will, we push his play as far as it will go."(Gay2). The Beggar and The Player are hurried as Act 1 begins. The setting is in Peachum's house, where he is going over his accounts, and he rationalizes his own hand in the industry of the trade of stolen goods, with an Air that gives us the theme of the play itself. Titled "An Old Woman Clothed in Gray" Peachum sings "Through all the employments of life, each neighbor abuses his brother; Whore and rogue they call husband and wife: All professions be-rogue one another." He goes on to berate every realm of professional employment and reasons that they all manage to cheat each other. The following scenes introduce us to Filch, a thief whom Peachum employs, Mrs. Peachum and the dilemma that exists about their daughter. It is rumored about that their

daughter Polly has “taken the fancy” of gang leader and womanizer Captain Macheath and they soon learn through the prying of Filch and the confessions of Polly herself. Polly first enters with her father Peachum trying to convince of the falsehood of the rumors through one of the most famous and popular Airs of the Opera Air 6 What Shall I do To Show How Much I love Her. Polly sings “Virgins are like the fair Flower in its Lustre...But Once pluck’d, ‘tis no longer alluring.” Telling her father she knows how a lady is to handle herself towards the Captain Macheath. As the truth is quickly revealed that Polly has already married Macheath, Peachum devises a scheme in which Polly will have her husband hung and receive her dowry. However it seems increasingly obvious given the reputation of Macheath that he probably has other wives and this would jeopardize the scheme. The Act ends with Polly retreating to her room where she has Macheath hidden. They sing a series of five songs comforting each other and Macheath swears his fidelity to a gullible Polly.

Act Two introduces us to the bottom rung of English society, the epitome of the satire, a Tavern in Newgate that has been congregated by Macheath’s Gang who slosh about in a drunken celebration. The thieves are the filthiest of society boasting of their “Try’d courage, and indefatigable Industry.”(Gay36) They sing “Fill Ev’ry Glass” in a jubilant tavern chorus before the arrival of their leader and fellow highwayman Macheath. Macheath enters the tavern and the celebration becomes a bit somber as he explains of the predicament of Peachum out for his head. But he warns that they cannot kill Peachum for their gang and livelihood, stealing and engaging in corrupt affairs is directly dependent on Peachum’s livelihood of running his business. The dog eat dog relationship of the business world is elaborated in the bind that Macheath finds himself

in. Macheath speaks of Peachum “as a bawd to a whore, I grant you, he is to us a great convenience.” Macheath declares he must go into hiding as the gang departs from the tavern. They sing “Let us take the road” in the Air March in *Rinaldo*, With Drums and Trumpets.” Based on Handels *Rinaldo*, this was a favorite scene of audiences and one of the more popular tunes. Macheath sings to the Tavern Drawer “Would You Have A Young Virgin” singing “If the Heart of a Man is deprest with cares The mist is dispelld when a woman appears” with that the whores arrive to please Macheath in a French “a la ronde” type dance. One Whore, Jenny, gives a personal serenade to Macheath as she signals in Peachum and Constables who make their arrest and pay off the ladies accordingly. They haul Macheath off to the prison where we find even more corruption and mayhem. Upon entering the prison we are introduced to Lockett “a corrupt galloer” who explains to Macheath the different price ranges for the shackles he will be wearing, that he can “pay more for lighter fetters”. He explains of the prisoners “tis fitting every gentleman please himself.” It is obvious here that Gay is making a mockery of the judicial system and its tendency to profit off of insignificant crimes and non alike. Lucy Lockett is soon to enter, and Macheath desperately offers her marriage denying his marriage to Polly. Meanwhile Peachum and Lockett become engaged in an argument while discussing their accounts and the fate of Macheath. Polly enters declaring herself the wife of Macheath and a quarrel breaks out in which her Lucy argue through exchanging airs. Peachum hauls Polly off while Macheath continues to persuade Lucy to help him escape, now bidding his fidelity to her.

Act Three begins with Macheath having already escaped and Lockett furiously berating Lucy, not so much for having helped Macheath but that she would do such

without receiving just compensation. Meanwhile Macheath has secretly joined his gang in a gambling house. Peachum and Lockit plot his recapture with the help of Diane Trapes, who tells them where to find Macheath under the agreement that Mrs. Trapes may set her price to any of the goods Peachum has. Macheath is subsequently captured while Lucy fails in the attempt to poison Polly when Polly drops the poisoned drink at the arrival of a detained Macheath. The final scenes of the play collapse in on the character Macheath, as he drinks himself into song. In a series of ten emotionally moving and melodramatic songs Macheath sings an empty reassurance to himself. He then sings to the tune of Green sleeves "Since Laws were made for ev'ry Degree, to curb vice in others as well as me, I wonder we have better Company upon Tyburn Tree." Upon concluding the tune enters two men from Macheath's gang who promise to fulfill his last request of seeing Peachum and Lockit to the gallows themselves. Lucy and Polly follow, weeping over the misfortune of their beloved husband, when suddenly four more wives enter, each carrying a baby. Macheath seeing the evidence before him pulls away from his wives saying "Four wives more! This is too much, go tell the sheriff's office I am ready."

The Beggar and The Player come back out to conclude the Opera. The Player is astonished that the Beggar would have Macheath executed and the Beggar explains "To make the piece perfect I was for doing strict poetical Justice. Macheath is to be hanged." The Player responds that this would not be to the taste of the town for the people did not come so see a tragedy. And so The Beggar invites Macheath's Reprise in which he confesses his love and marriage to Polly and proclaims a celebration in which all dance and the happy moral ending is restored.

And so we have the Balled Opera given to us by John Gay through a rather thought provoking satire and examination into the moral decay of life. It is a timeless tale of corruption and love that all can easily identify and sympathize with. The unprecedented success and influence of the Beggars Opera has been unrivaled as there were few successors to the Ballad Opera Style. However one can easily consider the very Musicals which are ever so popular today to be the gift of the invention of modernity. A mystery surrounds the exact origin of how John Gay really came to create such an out of place piece of music and literature so unlike that of anything that came before it. John Gay simply allowed us to make light of the truths of morality. The theme of mans inherently evil and moral degradation is rich in The Beggars Opera, and best stated by Gay in his own epitaph.

*“Life is Jest; and all things show it.
I thought so once; but now I know it.”
-John Gay*

Jon Gay: The Beggars Opera
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