

he fought for civil rights first in South Africa and then in his native India. The opera, with text entirely in Sanskrit, deals with Gandhi's years in South Africa (1893–1915), arriving as a newly-minted London barrister who considered himself more English than native, and leaving as a political leader, clad in the loincloth and sandals of the common people in whose name he fought.

The opera's three acts are under the aegis respectively of Leo Tolstoy, Rabindranath Tagore, and Martin Luther King. Although historical events are melded into a seamless non-narrative texture, the scenes played include the rescue of Gandhi from a hostile mob in Durban in 1896 by the wife of the local police chief, the burning of registration cards forced on colored people in 1906, and Gandhi's last major act of resistance, in the Newcastle March of 1912 to protest a tax imposed on Indian workers. The opera ends with a recitation from the *Baghavad Gita* of Krishna's promise to return whenever a wrong needs righting.

Glass: *Satyagraha*, scenes as above (Met 2021, Dante Anzolini, conductor; Phelim McDermott, director; Richard Croft, *Gandhi*)

Bertolt **Brecht** (1898–1956, *German playwright*), John **Fulljames** (1976– , *British director*), Philip **Glass** (1937– , *American composer*), George **Grosz** (1893–1959, *German-American painter*), Langston **Hughes** (1901–67, *American playwright*), Phelim **McDermott** (1963– , *British director*), Elmer **Rice** (1892–1967, *American playwright*), Kurt **Weill** (1900–50, *German-American composer*)

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OPERA AND REAL LIFE



7. STREET POLITICS

November 5, 2026

STREET POLITICS

FOR A STUDY OF SOCIAL REALITIES, you would think there was little to choose between the immigrant inhabitants of the Lower East Side tenement in **Kurt Weill's** *Street Scene* (1946) or the marginalized Indian workers in turn-of-the-century South Africa featured in the *Satyagraha* (1979) of **Philip Glass**. Yet the approaches of the two composers could hardly be more different. The one is ultra-realistic, creating a dense web of named characters who experience birth, death, comedy, hatred, and burgeoning love over a two-day span. The other covers twenty years in an oratorio-like pageant, where even the named characters are subsumed into a timeless ritual, and real-life violence and defiance are merely episodes in a long spiritual journey. One uses the American vernacular, sung in as many different accents as the countries that the tenement dwellers have left. The other is sung in an ancient tongue, Sanskrit, deliberately removed from the experience of the audience, the performers, or even most of the characters. How is it that both these approaches can have something equally important to say about human lives? *rb*.

A. LOCAL

Kurt Weill came to fame in twenties Berlin through his collaborations with playwright **Bertold Brecht** in works such as *The Threepenny Opera* and *Mahagonny*, satirizing the social inequalities of the Weimar Republic. Fleeing the Nazis in 1933, he came via Paris to New York, where he found his feet as composer of popular Broadway romances. But in his last works for the stage, *Street Scene* and *Lost in the Stars*, he found his way back to the social activism of his earlier years.

Weill: *Die Dreigroschenoper, Kanonensong* (clip from *Brechts Dreigroschenfilm*, biopic by Joachim A. Lang, 2017)

Weill's "American Opera" *Street Scene* (1946) was based upon the 1929 Pulitzer-Prize play by **Elmer Rice**, who made the adaptation himself. The two called in **Langston Hughes** to write the lyrics. It shows two days in the lives of the multi-ethnic inhabitants of a tenement on the Lower East Side. Interspersed among the many vignettes, which include Broadway-style ballads and dance numbers, are two more serious stories focused on the family of stage-hand **Frank Maurant**, abusive husband to his wife Anna and controlling father to his teenage daughter Rose. **Rose Maurant's** growing love for their neighbor **Sam Kaplan**, a bookish but alienated man of her own age, is the plot thread we shall explore in most detail. But an ultimately more devastating theme is the unhappiness of **Anna Maurant**, the consolation she takes in the arms of a milkman, and the tragedy that will ensue when her husband Frank finds out.

Weill: *Street Scene*, opening "Ain't it awful, the heat!" (Teatro Real, Madrid, 2017; John Fulljames, *director*)

Weill: *Street Scene*, Frank's aria "Let things be like they always was" (Madrid, 2017; Paolo Szot, *Frank Maurant*)

Weill: *Street Scene*, numbers from the end of Act I: "Lonely House," "Wouldn't you like to be on Broadway?," "What good would the moon be?," and "Remember that I care" (Madrid, 2017; Joel Prieto, *Sam Kaplan*; Richard Burkhard, *Harry Easter*; Mary Bevan, *Rose Maurant*)

B. GLOBAL

Satyagraha (1979) is the third opera in Glass's "Portrait Trilogy," after *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) and before *Akhnaten* (1983). All are about people "whose personal vision," in the composer's words, "transformed the thinking of their times through the power of ideas rather than by military force." *Satyagraha* is a Sanskrit compound, meaning "adherence to truth"; it was the name given by **Mahatma Gandhi** (1869–1948) to the policy of non-violent resistance with which