

Key industry, as theatre practitioners have to invest

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Key practitioners in musical theatre are writers, composers, lyricists, choreographers, directors and many more, they are all part of the process of putting a show together and getting it up on its feet. However, Tony Kushner argues that 'there's such a difference between a really great composer and a really great theatre composer' (Evan, 2014: 53) which is relevant to many other practitioners in the industry, as theatre practitioners have to invest time into the piece so that the music relates to the book, the lyrics and the style etc. In this case study, it will explore why John Kander (a composer) and his partner Fred Ebb (a lyricist) are key practitioners. This will discuss different critical accounts on a selection of musicals they have worked together on; Cabaret, Chicago and The Scottsboro Boys.

In *America's Songs* it states that 'In the flamboyant yet conservative world of the Broadway musical, John Kander and Fred Ebb wrote hit shows that were startlingly, dazzling innovative' (Furia and Lasser, 2008: 292-293). This comment states clearly that they are able to write hit shows whilst still having a deeper meaning to what you would normally see in a 'boy-meets-girl' musical. Their work is discussed by many writers on what a great team they were, before Ebb passed away, and how they take true stories, and real life events, whilst highlighting specific problems; the Civil Rights Movement in Cabaret, vaudeville in Chicago and minstrelsy in The Scottsboro Boys. A key feature of their work is that a lot of their material is dark, yet this is what makes their pieces so 'Kander and Ebb' as they liked to work with rich material, full of problems and emotional implications because they found it easier to write about such problems over a regular 'boy meets girl' scenario. Along with all these pieces being dark, they are all set in the early Nineteenth

Century, a different time period to what their audiences' are in. In an interview on Front Row, in 2014, John Kander made a comment on how he thinks using distance from a different time the audience is living in, can make them enjoy it more, as musical theatre is not what life is. He states ' maybe that's why Cabaret wasn't a big hit at the time' (Front Row, 2014) as the audience were not ready to become socially aware to it all. Cabaret was one of Kander and Ebb's first hits, set between 1929 and 1930, which aided in them becoming ' arguably the most subversive practitioners of the concept musical.

' (Leve. 2015: 4), indicating they have had a huge impact on the changes in musical theatre, going from the integrated musical to the concept musical. The concept musical would ' comment on the story metaphorically rather than advance it in dramatically expressive songs.' (Furia and Lasser, 2008: 286) however they were not fully there and only used part of the feature; it had the non-linear side in the ' Kit Kat Klub' whilst still having the traditional book musical style throughout. Harold Prince was the man who took this on as a project as he was interested in the Civil Rights Movement, he could see the parallel between "' The spiritual bankruptcy of Germany in the 1920's and our country in the 1960's'" (Furia and Lasser, 2008: 284). He wanted to make it contemporary and relatable to the audience. The piece is based on ' I Am Camera', which is Jon Van Druten's adaptation of Christopher Isherwood's ' Berlin Stories'. Prince wanted to take the important message from this book whilst still making it entertaining, he wanted it to create " A musical that

would be “ more than a musical”” (Furia and Lasser, 2008: 284) which is the reason he asked Kander and Ebb to be part of the creative team.

Instead of writing a dark score, “ they gave many of their numbers a gay, glitzy patina.” (Furia and Lasser, 2008: 285) making them very upbeat, juxtaposing to the dark message the show was telling. When Sally sings the song Cabaret; “ What good is sitting alone in your room?/ Come hear the music play;/ Life is a cabaret, old chum” the lyrics are underscoring ‘ her and much of Germany’s obliviousness to the rise Nazism.

” (Furia and Lasser, 2008: 286) that was going on in Berlin at the time.

Cabaret was headlined with; ‘A ‘ Cabaret’ with fresh ways to make us squirm’ (Reid, 2017), backing up that the way this is performed is quite shocking and the matter they discuss can be disturbing to viewers, however it is still entertaining which supports them being key practitioners. Well-known features in John Kander’s compositions are his use of vamps, described to be ‘ among the most recognizable vamps in the musical theatre repertory’ (Leve, 2015: 25).

Chita Rivera says they ‘ are part of what defines’ (Leve, 2015: 25) their music and makes it their own. The use of a vamp is a repeated musical feature in which marks the start of a song to form the mood, and can ‘ often define the rhythmic and melodic profile of the song” (Leve, 2015: 25). Kander started most of their songs with a vamp, then inside the vamp found the beginning of the melody of which the lyrics would be sung to. His music expands the harmonic palette and is a ‘ more inventive use of the mirror mode.” (Leve,

2015: 28). Kander borrowed harmonies shifting between a major and a minor key whilst increasing the dramatic effect. The song 'Maybe This Time' uses the inner ascending line to form the harmonic progression, whilst taking the counter line to the repeated theme in the vocals to help build up the tension. This then makes the whole song develop and get stronger, both musically and characteristically, showing the character Sally Bowles's happiness and self-worth of finally finding a meaningful relationship.

Through the years it had been argued that "The work of Kander and Ebb has shown a consistent Brechtian style... though their political impact is somewhat light" (Taylor and Symonds, 2014: 59) showing how they have been influenced and morphed the idea into their own. In the original production of Cabaret, with Prince, he used 'a huge mirror in which they found themselves reflected' (Taylor and Symonds, 2014: 61), making them part of the performance not just viewing it. This is an example of Brecht's theory of alienating the audience, known as *Verfremdungseffekt*. The audience are led into a false sense of security with the satirical show using light entertainment on heavy subjects. Brecht once said 'Art is not a mirror with which to reflect reality but a hammer with which to shape it.' (Bbc. co. uk, 2018), which means that what the audience views on stage can be changed and it is up to them to take action.

This is seen in Cabaret involving the Civil Rights Movement, directly linking the Kit Kat Klub (which was an actual club in 1920's called Kit Kat Club) with the white extremists 'Ku Klutz Klan'. Also this can be seen through their use of Cultural Materialism ('historicizing a cultural text' (Taylor and

Symonds, 2014: 61)), by relating it to the treatment of someone or group, be it by gender, race or religion. At the end of a production in the 90's, the character Emcee starts to remove his costume revealing a concentration camp uniform with a yellow badge and a pink triangle. This signified the Jews and homosexuality, making the piece shape to comment on a more contemporary issue bringing the impact of AIDS to light, whereas in the 60's it represented racism instead. In a 2006 production the whole cast stripped down naked, revealing their "emaciated bodies vulnerably awaiting extermination in the gas chambers" (Taylor and Symonds, 2014: 64), there is a clear portrayal to the context of the script here (the Holocaust).

This was also relative to the audience at the time, as the war with Afghanistan was happening and it was literally telling the audience "It could happen here too" (a line from the play) making their minds think about what they had just seen rather than just being entertained. A lot of Cabaret's songs also have a deeper meaning, for example in the song 'If you could see her through my eyes', sung by Emcee, a novelty vaudeville, a gorilla in a pink veiled hat and tutu appears as the soft-show rhythm is playing, this duet links to racial issues in the 60's and the ethnic tension in the 20's/30's. Whilst trying to remind the audience that 'love can happen between people of difference' (Taylor and Symonds, 2014: 63). Kander and Ebb were portraying the Nazi's views at the time, on how Jews were closer to the evolutionary chain, shocking the audience with the line 'She wouldn't look Jewish at all'.

Cabaret has been described as one of the musicals that still to this day "speak to the heart of human experience" (Kendrick, 2017: 255) which is

highly supported in this song as they show the overcoming of societal barriers. They also comment on other issues such as money in "Money makes the world go around".

It has been discussed that Ebb was "capturing the crass cynicism of the cabaret but also the hothouse environment of producing musical theatre on Broadway" (Knapp, Morris and Wolf, 2013: 351). This links to how much money can be put into the show and how much money can be earned within a show, for example; the raise in ticket prices every year at the box office. In their stage show *Chicago*, adapted from Maurine Dallas Watkins' play *Chicago*, there are also the use of Brechtian techniques, such as breaking the fourth wall especially with the character Roxie as a lot of her songs are set in her mind, not in real world.

They also have the band leader announce every song just before it is performed which takes you out of the dramatic action a touch. The musical is based on two 1924 murder cases; the murderers were called Belulah Annan and Bleva Gaertner (who are Velma Kelly and Roxie Hart in the show). The pair, in the show, get out of jail because of a man named Billy who 'transforms "justice" into "showbiz"' (Furia and Lasser, 2008: 293).

Nowadays it is argued that it is relevant to a more contemporary audience as the media still makes celebrities from criminals 'while the public rebels against attempts at legislating morality' (Miller, 1999) which is what happens in this musical as the media was the way Roxie won over people with her lies and is released from prison.

The music at the time of this piece was very jazzstyled so Kander and Ebb listened to a lot of the music from the era, Kander later describing the unconscious process of listening and 'letting your brain soak it in and then writing' (Furia and Lasser, 2008: 293) much easier to actually create a song, especially Chicago. The music throughout aids in 'the idea that jazz and its associated lifestyles have warped Roxie' (Knapp, 2009: 114), which is put forward quite cynically, and has made Roxie a murderer and it is not really her fault, trying to capture the public's sympathy. Each song in the show 'was in a particular style associated with show biz' (Furia and Lasser, 2008: 293) at the time, Ebb capturing the language of vaudeville throughout all the songs written to create the metaphor of show business as life (just like it is in Roxie's eyes). This was because Bob Fosse (the choreographer for both Chicago and Cabaret and who Ebb had collaborated with on writing the book for this show) had the idea of wanting to 'play on a vaudeville stage so that all musical numbers would be "justified"' (Gottfried, 2009: 305) so Fred 'made it vaudeville based on the idea that the characters were performers' (Furia and Lasser, 2008: 293) and based them around someone else. For example; Roxie was Helen Morgan, Velma was Texas Guinan, Billy Flynn was Ted Lewis, Mama Morton was Sophie Tucker. Ebb would take on Fosse's suggestions and then go home to test things out. For instance he might suggest adding in a the slap in a scene Ebb had written, so Ebb would try and rewrite the scene with a new action to see if it would work or not.

The original idea from Fosse for the closing number was for there to be two solo songs, each for Kelly and Hart. The writers wanted a 'cheesy act in

which Velma played the drum and Roxie saxophone' (Furiaand Lasser, 2008: 294) however even with this idea in mind, Kander and Ebb boththought it neither of the songs written were working. So when Fosse asked themto make only one song for the characters, they were delighted and they managedto write ' Nowaydays' in an hour! Inthis song they sing the line " There's life everywhere" suggesting conflictionwith showbiz in the idea that although it is quite sleazy, it is also excitingand full on ' life'. The announcerintroduces the act is " Chicago's Killer Dillers", whilst stating that histheatre is home to ' family entertainment'. In an article on this musical it isargued that this song can be made contemporary as it relates to ' today'sentertainment industry, as dozens of special interest groups complain thatmovies and television are corrupting our youth.

' This analysis makes clearidentification to the present as this is still happening; take OJ Simpson as anexample, the trial for the murder of his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and RonGoldman was televised live and was watched by thousands, becoming the ' trial ofthe century' (Brown, Muldowney and Efron, 2017). Nancy Glass says in this newsarticle that it involves sex, murder and money which will always be on peoples'minds on whether he had killed them or not. This links directly back tovaudeville, as it would not be known without an audience and neither would haveChicago nor Simpson. Other serious accusations arefound in The Scottsboro Boys. Thisplay had hints of vaudeville in the show and used the device of having a playwithin a play (just like Cabaret and Chicago)whilst bringing out apolitical/social matter. The musical is about 9 black, male teenagers who

were pulled off a train in Scottsboro, Alabama in 1931 and are wrongfully accused of raping two white women. The case goes on for 9 whole years.

Kander said in an interview on *Front Row* (2014) that Fred Ebb had originally said that the audience would pull away from this piece if they did not make it entertaining. They decided that they needed to sweeten the story in some way with the music. Unfortunately, Ebb had passed before this show was released so Kander took on the project himself along with David Thompson who wrote the book. The style of the songs are quite jaunty, juxtaposing with the dark matter at hand, reminding Kander of 'Oh What A Lovely War' with the style and intent of each song. Their songs created a false, safe atmosphere where the audience could enjoy themselves but the key feature in this was their use of Minstrelsy (black face) to bring forward the dark, underlining the issue of racism.

Minstrelsy was a form of comic theatre in America where white minstrels would paint their faces black ' whose material caricatured the singing and dancing of slaves.' (Gorlinski, Parwani and Tikkanen, 2010) in the eighteenth century and later it would influence vaudeville theatre and other sources on media. Kander and Ebb subvert the original portrayal of this and turn it on its head, by having a black actor playing a white character. By disrupting this they ' force history into the present' (Stahl, 2016; 75) but they can only push the audience so far in this sense.

A man called Sarfraz Manzoor commented on the piece on *The Review Show* in 2013, saying that because of this use of the flipped minstrelsy the injustice

of the 'rape' is lost as the audience are too shocked at the white character being portrayed by a black actor. Although, this is the exact reason they used it, as they wanted to make the audience aware of the racism in the story and how racial discrimination is still happening to this day. It is argued on this show that it is 'one of the worst Kander and Ebb productions' (The Review Show, 2013) as it doesn't match the musical or political terms it sets out to show. However, Hoffman argues that 'While the musical engages with a variety of social topics, the issue of race takes precedence' (Hoffman, 2014: 3), linking back to the Jim Crow Laws which consisted of the separation of any person of a racial colour that is not white. Ebb writes these lyrics 'Wheel about, turn about, and do just so/ Every time dey wheel about, dey jump Jim Crow' which makes the spectators aware of these laws and can make the audience shocked at the direct confrontation and how politically correct it actually is. At the very end of the performance the cast put on black face makeup and 'sing about the media frenzy surrounding their newfound notoriety' (Stahl, 2016: 77) but their upbeat number is brought to a halt by the revelations of the boys' fates.

When they are asked to perform their usual ending number 'the Cakewalk' but refuse and remove their faces clean, leaving the stage. This offers the idea of hope of change with the Civil Rights Movement. The minstrelsy helps with the way the show is constructed as well. The actors use chairs and tell their story with them (a semi-circle of chairs were used in a lot of minstrel shows) using them to change the scene from a train to a cell etc.

'The actors become in charge of the structure: they build the set'(Perloff and Richard, 2012: 6). The end is left with the chairs in the semi-circle are completely tipped over metaphorically showing how they have deconstructed the minstrel form. The presence of both the minstrelsy and Brechtian elements leaves the 'audience to think critically on this satirical commentary on the racist attitude in the South at the time of the Scottsboro trials and the minstrel tradition.'(Robson, 2017: 3), whilst making 'racism' a key theme throughout to make the audience think of what is happening now compared to then, and if there is much difference. To conclude, both Kander and Ebb have adapted minstrelsy, Brechtian forms and interlinked this with the idea of concept musicals.

They are both key practitioners because they manage to create intriguing entertainment whilst still making the audience think. The pair have used these forms as stepping points to create their own material, creating in depth pieces with not-so-hidden messages. This essay has looked at three different musicals that they have written together and commented on the influence they have had on the audience, which was their initial desire, as in these pieces they wanted to make a contemporary audience analyse whether things have really changed in the world or not.