

Developments in the west end musical scene



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DISCUSS THE RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WEST END MUSICAL SCENE; THIS SHOULD INCLUDE AN ANALYSIS OF THE ‘ MEGA-MUSICAL’ MANIA, THE TREND TO CREATE NEW MUSICALS BASED ON EXISTING SONGS (SONG MIGRATION) AND STAGE TRANSFERS OF SUCCESSFUL FILMS.

From Sophocles through William Shakespeare to Eminem, writers have sought to use the rhythms of language to accentuate the story they are seeking to share. The pre-Caxton ^[1] society relied on an oral tradition to deliver stories of fact and fiction. Cultures spanning the entire globe and all ages of civilization have instinctively adopted musical storytelling; it is prominent in various forms even now – be it around a camp fire, at a tribal ceremony, an inner city playground or on a West End stage.

In today’s world, language and music are at our fingertips. They are both instantaneous. And they can be married in a second. Technically, music is intricate. Most writers will say the same about language. But in an inspired moment they can conjoin and express something wonderful both sonically and linguistically. The act of constructing such a moment can be the end result of many less fruitful moments – but there is always the chance that it could just happen instantaneously. Our logistical minds tell us that it just is not possible; that we would never be able to express ourselves beautifully and eloquently in musical form. And yet the compulsion to try and do so has arrested most people, even if only for a quickly aborted solitary moment. So perhaps here lies the fascination with musicals. They show ‘ life as we know it’ happily residing in an alternate reality – where music and language are easy bed partners and everything goes to extremes. Or does it?

The West End is one of London's most popular tourist attractions. It has built its reputation, in tandem with New York's Broadway, as the commercial mecca of musical theatre. Las Vegas has the showgirls but Broadway and the West End share the showtunes. Indeed, while their identities are undeniably distinct, the relationship between them is close; same sex twins rather than identical ones. Each has their own nuances of behaviour – the younger twin Broadway hunts that bit more keenly for the next off-beat musical whirlwind; the older West End plays percentages but plays them with palpable success.

The term West End was originally coined as a geographical short cut – a way of describing a part of London synonymous with theatre. Since its inception into London vernacular the phrase ' West End' has mutated to describe something meta-geographical. While once upon a time it merely represented an actual place, now it also describes the gateway to an invented world of glitz, glamour and show. The West End may still be the home of theatre, but the kind of theatre that it houses has become very easily classifiable. The listings do not lie. And neither do they try to. The West End is a haven for small ideas done big; big names, big shows, big spectacles, big budgets, big risks.

The social and artistic significance of theatre as an art form has not suffered in the time since the West End theatres were constructed. But the immediacy of rival entertainments, chiefly television and film, has undoubtedly provided so comfortable an alternative for the borderline theatregoing public that its popularity has. Ultimately, the public's relationship with theatre has somewhat inverted itself; once the entertainment of the people, theatre has become high-brow, elitist, exclusive

even. Or so we are led to believe. Every year the people entrusted with running the country's theatres are ensconced in attempts to make theatre more accessible. Nicholas Hytner at the National Theatre has incorporated a sponsorship deal with Travelex with the express purpose of enabling its shows to be available to people for as little as £10 a ticket. Theatrical output is continuing to diversify in new directions. The National Theatre still produces the time-honoured classics that will appease their traditional supporters. But they also invited outside companies including Theatre de Complicite, Improbable, Shunt and Kneehigh to co-develop their new work.

Arts Council funding dictates a certain amount of programming for in-house producing theatres throughout the country. It is impossible to equate the artistic worth of a proposed project while it exists solely as an outline on a piece of paper. But it is easier to quantify the greater social import of the same project. Therefore the involvement in various local outreach initiatives including young people's theatre and new writing programmes serves duplicate purposes. But in doing so it runs the risk of wresting a certain amount of control from the artistic directors, or at least diluting the intent of their work.

But the West End is not really concerned with any of this. The theatres are privately owned and have little social obligation. West End theatre is a notoriously unpredictable money market. Make a big success of yourself and you can eventually buy it up – which is exactly what Andrew Lloyd Webber and Cameron Mackintosh have ended up doing. Lloyd Webber's Really Useful Group are the proprietors of twelve of the capital's larger theatres. By January 2006 Delfont Mackintosh will control another seven, and will have <https://assignbuster.com/developments-in-the-west-end-musical-scene/>

begun constructing the Sondheim Theatre – the first theatre to be built on Shaftesbury Avenue since 1931. The long-term plan of Delfont Mackintosh is to refurbish and modernise theatreland. But one cannot help but think that their extreme makeover will be restricted to the facilities and layout – and that the entertainment will remain as traditional as ever.

The musical-as-we-know-it grew out of the 19th Century tradition of music hall, which itself was the bastard son of drink and rowdiness. After removing the alcohol from drunken singalongs, and relocating from the pub to theatres, the 1860s saw the popularity of the newly-arrived music hall go from good idea to massively popular entertainment. The humbling beginnings of the musical cannot help but reveal the nucleus of the idea; it was born of accident – of people seeking to have pure, unadulterated entertainment. In that respect, it has no one form; no one philosophy; indeed no real sense of philosophy; no real sense of purpose other than fun, fun, fun!

As the musical was developing it was the bastion of popular music of the time. Through Gilbert and Sullivan, Irving Berlin, Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill and Cole Porter, the men and women behind musical were the most revered song writers at work in the Western world. Ten years into the post-war era there was a marked shift. The ‘ musical standards’ that made dry, wry and witty observations about upper middle class were about to be trumped by rock and roll. And John Osborne’s 1956 ‘ kitchen-sink-drama’ *Look Back In Anger* was going to have repercussions outside the world of the well-made play [2] .

The birth of transmittable media was only going to swell the amount of music being produced. In the early days of the wireless radio, families gathered to listen to the songs of Ivor Novello or Noel Coward. By the mid-1960s many families had television sets in their front rooms; radio broadcasts were a competitive business; and air transport links had made the world traversable for all those who could afford it. Music was a commodity that could be sent from one side of the world to the other. And in the slipstream of the music were the musicians themselves.

Through television and radio, songwriters and musicians had an identity. They became icons – the most celebrated people on the planet. And their music was nowhere near the West End stage. For the first time since their inception musicals were not using the popular music of the time. Rock'n'roll was being held in musical purgatory by traditionalists unhappy at its low-brow ideals. While cinema was running as fast and far as it could with the concept of the film musical, the stage was seeking to deliver variations on earlier themes. Elvis Presley made numerous musical films – as did The Beatles. In the 1960s the West End was awash with Broadway imports – the influence of Leonard Bernstein, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe and other transatlantic success stories was diluting the integrity of the West End as the older brother of the musical. But the psychedelic overtones of that time were to create musical anomalies; while some composers flirted with the concept of rock, others weren't afraid to dive headlong into its bottomless pit. After its anti-Vietnam stance and inclusion of group nudity caused outrage on Broadway, *Hair* opened in the West End in 1968. From being the chosen playground of mild-mannered conservatives,

the musical was being politicised – and modernised. Within five years, the ‘Age of Aquarius’^[3] had been further capitalized upon by *Godspell*, *Oh Calcutta* and even *Jesus Christ Superstar* – which proved to be the foundation on which the new dawn of the musical would be built. Today’s twin Godfathers of musical composition for Broadway and the West End carry the bright torch of yesteryear; Stephen Sondheim represents his forefathers’ fascination with the off-beat, with Andrew Lloyd Webber never straying from the musically conservative beat.

There are various factors that dictate the recent successes and failures in West End theatre. But the starting point for every West End production is money – a fact beautifully demonstrated by the plot of one of the West End’s most popular current productions ‘The Producers’. Essentially, the capitalist dawn that swallowed up free love has made currency the new leading man in musical theatre. Producers need big ideas and big songs to legislate for big budgets. So instead of trying to predict what people may like and creating a musical story around it, the West End decided to reduce the risk and simply take the music that people already like and create a story around that.

In some ways the origin of song migration is old revue style shows – popular hits belted out with no real desire to create an accompanying piece of drama or comedy. Coupled with the screen to stage success of musical films like *The Lion King*, a producer was now able to weigh up potential West End shows safe in the knowledge that a stable of worldwide smash hits could enable a musical to run for years, even with a bad review. Suddenly the sheer bankability of Lloyd Webber was looking like an outlandish risk

alongside the music of Abba ^[4], Queen ^[5] or even (the critically lauded but never supergroup status) of Madness ^[6]. Negotiations are in process for the trend to continue, with Bob Marley, The Beatles and Elton John just some of the musical legends in line to have their songs shoe-horned into some money-spinning stage extravaganza that makes almost no sense at all. Not that the public really care. They want to go and sing-a-long like the pub dwellers of the 1840s that unknowingly helped begin the process of musical theatre. And who shall we choose to lead the sing-song? Well, preferably someone famous off the telly, of course.

The West End is a remarkably lucrative place. For his unscheduled stint in the opening cast run of *The Producers* at the end of 2004, Nathan Lane was being paid £42, 000 a week for the lead role as Max Bialystock. It is a clear indication of the simple transaction between moneymen and talent; the star name guarantees the box office receipts. The West End has been flooded with stars – some of whom have no musical pedigree – because celebrity is deemed to have finally overridden talent. The good, bad and ugly (in no particular order) of recent years include David Hasselhoff ^[7], Martine McCutcheon ^[8] and Denise Van Outen ^[9].

And if you don't want to spend money on star names, then you'd better be sure to have some seriously impressive stage gimmicks; *Miss Saigon* famously had a helicopter, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* got in to hot water when the eponymous flying car failed to take off in previews, and *Phantom of the Opera* has a plunging chandelier moment that will wake up anyone snoozing in the stalls. So with standard tickets averaging out at around £40, the

theatre-goer demands a truly amazing experience. But amazing and original are poles apart – and that's why when the formula is right, all you need to do is repeat it. There are exceptions. *The Bombitty of Errors* was a rap interpretation of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, and was a small but perfectly-formed global success. *Stomp* became a phenomenon through gradual word of mouth and because it is a different kind of spectacle. *Jerry Springer: The Opera* began life as an idea at a scratch night at the Battersea Arts Centre and grabbed the attention of every newspaper and fundamentalist Christian in the Western World. But such shows grow from humble beginnings and are swept away on public curiosity.

As in any art form, there are people willing to take risks because they believe their work has a market. *Bombay Dreams* and *The Far Pavilions* identify a recently developed appreciation of Asian music and culture. The off-Broadway hit *Batboy* continues in the tradition of earlier pacesetters *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* for kitsch rock operas. But some of these are accidental intruders in the world of the West End. They weren't sure if they were really invited but came anyway.

One group that certainly were invited are blockbuster films; whether they have songs in them or not. Seemingly the films don't even have to have been that successful. *The Witches of Eastwick* had a successful run in the West End. But more than likely, the film will have a readymade audience. *The Full Monty* was relocated to middle America from Sheffield to make it a Broadway success. *Billy Elliott* is well into previews, but the advance word is that it will be a significant hit. Or better still, just take a film with songs already in them – you don't stand to make as much money, but the

guarantee of an audience is that much stronger. *Mary Poppins* has been well-received by most, and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* is in its third year.

There are currently 36 theatres in the West End of London's theatreland ^[10]. As of Monday 2 May 2005, 27 are currently housing a production. 17 of those are musicals. This ratio is fairly consistent – and shows no signs of relenting. Essentially a hit West End musical needs a hook; star name, hit songs, hit movie, famous composer, popular revival. Something that can be reduced to a two-word phrase. If you haven't got any of those, then heaven help you. Because the West End public certainly won't.

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Footnotes

[1] William Caxton, inventor of the printing press (1474), which enabled literature to be mass-produced and readily available to the public.

[2] A term coined by Terrence Rattigan for the four-act structure of a play that had been the norm for successful playwrights in the first half of the Twentieth Century.

[3] A term synonymous with late 60s flower power and liberal ideologies – derived from a song from the musical ‘ Hair’.

[4] ‘ Mamma Mia’.

[5] ‘ We Will Rock You’.

[6] ‘ Our House’.

[7] ‘ Chicago’, Adelphi Theatre, 2004

[8] ‘ My Fair Lady’, Theatre Royal Drury Lane, 2001

[9] ‘ Chicago’, Adelphi, 2001, ‘ Tell Me On A Sunday’, Gielgud, 2003

[10] They are the Adelphi, Albery, Aldwych, Apollo, Arts, Cambridge, Comedy, Criterion, Dominion, Theatre Royal Drury Lane, Duchess, Duke of York’s,

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Fortune, Garrick, Gielgud, Haymarket, Her Majesty's, London Palladium, Lyceum, Lyric, New Ambassadors, New London, Palace, Phoenix, Piccadilly, Playhouse, Prince Edward, Prince of Wales, Queen's, Savoy, Shaftesbury, St Martin's, Strand, Trafalgar Studios, Vaudeville, Wyndhams. Other 'central' theatres not classified as 'West End' include the Donmar Warehouse, National Theatre, Old Vic, Victoria Palace, Apollo Victoria, Lilian Baylis Saddlers Wells, Peacock, Almeida and the Royal Court.