8 'We Said We Wouldn't Look Back': British Musical Theatre, 1935–1969

JOHN SNELSON

Between the early Edwardian musical comedies of the Gaiety Theatre and the recent megamusicals of Andrew Lloyd Webber is a largely forgotten era in the history of the British musical of some twenty-five years. Between 1935 and 1960, 127 new British musicals were presented in the West End, but only a handful have survived into today's active repertory. *Me and My Girl* (1937; music by Noel Gay) was neglected for decades until it received a major London revival in 1984 and successfully transferred to Broadway. *The Boy Friend* (1953–54; Sandy Wilson), itself a tribute to an earlier style of show, has achieved an international prominence, while *Salad Days* (1954; Julian Slade) has found popularity predominantly in Britain. Some individual songs from shows of this period are still favourites in the light music repertory – particularly those by Ivor Novello and Noël Coward – but almost always the songs have been divorced from any knowledge of the original shows. Three shows of the 1960s give some indication of the turnaround in transatlantic fortunes of British shows that followed from the 1970s onwards: *Oliver!* (1960; Lionel Bart), *Stop the World – I Want to Get* Off (1961; Leslie Bricusse and Anthony Newley) and *Half a Sixpence* (1964; music and lyrics by David Heneker) were given successful Broadway productions, and all three were filmed. Yet other contemporary West End hits of the time that did not transfer to New York, including others by Bart, Bricusse and Heneker, have received little, if any, attention. Based on such selective evidence, any view of British musical theatre in the mid-twentieth century is likely to be strange.

So what happened to all of the other shows? Why did most of them never receive more than one original professional production? Were they really so bad as to be better forgotten or did other factors lead to their neglect? This chapter will look at the major works of the period and provide some answers as to why this part of the British musical theatre has been and continues to be largely ignored.[1]

1935–1939

In 1935 there were seven new British musicals in the West End, including the 'sporting farce' of *Twenty to One* (music by Billy Mayerl), *Love*

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Plate 9 Programme cover from original production of *Twenty to One* (12 November 1935, Coliseum). Photograph from private programme collection of John Snelson

Laughs – !, (music by Noel Gay) and *Please Teacher!* (music by Jack Waller and Joseph Tunbridge). However, the show that made 1935 a significant year for British musical theatre was *Glamorous Night*, the first of a series of musicals by Ivor Novello (1893–1951). Novello dominated British musical theatre of the 1930s and 1940s with an extraordinary series of popular stage works that had huge national appeal and

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yet almost never travelled beyond Britain. At the time of his sudden death in 1951, he was one of the most loved figures of British theatre and a household name. Half a century later he is largely forgotten.

Born David Ivor Davies, Ivor Novello formed his professional name from his own middle name and that of his mother, Clara Novello Davies; he changed his name formally to Ivor Novello by deed poll in 1927. Novello first came to public prominence with his music for the song 'Keep the Home Fires Burning', which fast became an anthem of World War I. In 1916 he was co-composer with Jerome Kern on *Theodore & Co*; in contemporary British terms Novello was the big name and Kern the newcomer. Novello wrote a series of musical shows and revues in the rest of that decade, but his contributions to such works in the 1920s were increasingly subject to his diversions into silent film as a romantic actor. After becoming the country's foremost matinée idol on film, he began to develop a similar presence in the theatre in the early 1930s. When the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, needed something spectacular to revive its fortunes in 1935, Novello's combination of musical, theatrical and performing skills made him the ideal choice to create a big new work.

The resulting show, *Glamorous Night*, was an imaginative concoction of operetta, musical comedy and ballet, with a plot that combined old and new in the romance of a Ruritanian princess and a television inventor. But it was most notable for its scale. Everything about it was indulgent: lines of royal guards, a horse-drawn carriage and a gypsy wedding made the show spectacular. Most strikingly, through the hydraulics of the huge Drury Lane stage, the sinking of a passenger liner was simulated, and photographs of the show reveal how like film was the whole approach. And this is where Novello innovated: he brought the visual, geographical and temporal potential of film to the stage. He followed *Glamorous Night* with *Careless Rapture* (1936), *Crest of the Wave* (1937) and *The Dancing Years* (1939), which reinforced the image of a 'Novello' show as overtly emotive in music, romantically idealised in plot and rich in visual impact.

Today, the reputation of Novello stands in sharp contrast to his contemporary Noël Coward (1899–1973). In many ways their careers are similar. Both occupied the roles of playwright, film and stage actor, composer and (though to a limited extent with Novello) lyricist. They were both icons of their time, with Coward as the urbane sophisticate and Novello as the male romantic ideal. Yet any discussion of British musical theatre keeps returning to Novello as a pivotal figure, while Coward is largely incidental, in opposition to their more general theatrical reputations. Novello's eight shows were produced consistently

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between 1935 and 1951, with a common identifiable quality that allows his name to be used as an adjective for that style. Coward's musical theatre output in the same period constantly changed direction, through *Operette* (1938), *Pacific 1860* (1946), *Ace of Clubs* (1950) and *After the Ball* (1954) but continually failed to regain the public appeal of his first 'operette' *Bitter Sweet* (1929). While individual songs, often comic, from Coward's shows have found a life in cabaret, the lack of a common identity through his diverse stage works has left no sense of a distinct Coward musical theatre style. Coward now has an international profile whereas Novello is barely remembered nationally, although professional revivals of the musicals of both men are almost completely unknown. Despite the temporary boost to Novello's reputation through his (historically questionable) portrayal in Robert Altman's film *Gosford Park* (2001), it is only the British music industry's annual Ivor Novello Awards that now give his name any significant public prominence.

Today, however, the most widely known British musical of the 1930s, through a modern reworking, is not by either Novello or Coward. *Me and My Girl* (1937) became an immediate success through both its accessible, tuneful score and a storyline designed to showcase the performer Lupino Lane. The central character of Bill Snibson, a working-class cockney, was developed for the musical *Twenty to One* (1935), with music by Billy Mayerl (1902–59), who is now best remembered for his syncopated piano style and accompanying piano schools.[2] *Me and My Girl* was written to capitalise on the success of the Snibson character as performed by Lane, and with Gay's score became a success with hit songs. Of its numbers, 'Leaning on a Lamp-post' is characteristic of Gay's ability to write simple, instantly appealing melodies while the success of the cockney strut 'The Lambeth Walk', complete with dance steps, gave the name to the film of the show (1939) and achieved remarkable fame. The show ran for 1,646 performances at the Victoria Palace, successfully toured and had West End revivals in 1941, 1945 and 1949. It was a much less sophisticated style of show than that of the Novello romances, relying on a farcical plot, slapstick humour, specialty dances, even audience vocal participation in 'The Lambeth Walk', all of which reveal links with the peculiarly British form of the pantomime, whose influence on the British understanding of the musical has generally been neglected.

Novello's best-remembered and most performed show is *The Dancing Years*, which opened at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, in March 1939. In the plot the composer Rudi Kleber (the leading male role, played, as usual, by Novello himself) is in love with the opera singer Maria Ziegler (Mary Ellis), but their affair is thwarted through misunderstandings. It was

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also a political musical, despite the operetta naivety of much of the onstage world, as Novello made his central character an Austrian Jew in order to bring in overt criticism of the Nazi regime. While much of this theme was included in the production, the management tried to remove it on the grounds that it was inappropriate for a musical. It proved to be all too appropriate for the time: as Coward had used the comparison of different ages and their ideals of love in *Bitter Sweet*, so Novello used a similar chronological contrast between the romantic Austria of operetta and the real effects of German political aspirations of the 1930s.

The music of the show is some of Novello's finest and includes a number of stylistic references that root the work in European operetta while incorporating the later American developments of the 1920s. Viennese operetta is referenced in the waltzes (the song 'Waltz of My Heart' remains one of his most frequently performed and best-known songs) and through many deliberate allusions to Lehár's *Die lustige Witwe* (*The Merry Widow*), which, in its original London production, had been a formative influence on Novello. In *The Dancing Years*, for example, the opening section of the concerted number 'Lorelei' is based on an inversion of the melody and an exact repetition of the rhythm of the opening chorus of the first act of Lehár's classic operetta. The solos 'My Heart Belongs to You', 'I Can Give You the Starlight' and 'My Dearest Dear' are expansive 4/4 melodies that show the later influence of Romberg, while the pastiche 'Primrose', in the style of an Edwardian musical comedy number, is an acknowledgement of the musical theatre of Novello's youth. The shifting time periods of the plot, the range of musical influences and the references to contemporary European politics provided a broad base for audience appeal. Yet a cursory glance at listings of long-running shows does not fully indicate the popularity of *The Dancing Years*. Special circumstances conspired to make Novello's most long-lived show the least successful if viewed only from the evidence of such raw statistics. Its initial London production ran for only 187 performances, closing on 1 September 1939.

Wartime

When war was declared in September 1939, West End theatres shut in anticipation of immediate bombing and more pressing priorities. Within a few weeks they opened again. In fact, throughout the war, the theatre benefitted from something of a revival of fortunes. There was a high demand for live entertainment to raise morale, and the number of professional actors consequently swelled considerably, so much so that, after

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war's end, British Actors' Equity felt obliged to discuss methods of regulating entry into the profession in order to counter this influx of inadequately trained performers. Not surprisingly there were very few new musicals in the first years of the war, and the revivals included many operetta-style works. These included such comforting favourites as *The Desert Song, Chu Chin Chow* (which began its initial record-breaking run during World War I), *Maid of the Mountains, Rose-Marie, Show Boat* and *The Merry Widow*. Musical comedy revivals included *Twenty to One* and *Me and My Girl*. In 1943, however, two West End successes were the new shows *Old Chelsea*, with music by the singer Richard Tauber, and *The Lisbon Story*, with music by Harry Parr Davies (1914–1955), more familiar at that time as Gracie Fields's regular accompanist. The latter show involved British spies and the French resistance and had its heroine killed on stage at the end. It was tuneful, indulgently dramatic and just sufficiently removed in location and events to tread a fine line between reflecting wartime concerns and providing a diversion from them. Novello had one of his few near misses in 1943 with *Arc de Triomphe*, a biographical musical based on the life of Mary Garden, but reworked as the story of an imaginary French singer, Marie Forêt. For other West End composers it would have been considered a fair run, but 222 performances for Novello was well below his usual expectations. Yet an omnipresent feature of musical theatre around the whole country and in the West End during the war was his earlier show *The Dancing Years*. It had been deprived of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, at the start of the war when the theatre was taken over as the headquarters of ENSA (Entertainments National Service Association). There was no other sufficiently large theatre available in the West End to which it could move. After a year's delay, it was launched as a national tour in September 1940, finally returning to the Adelphi in the West End in March 1942 and playing there until July 1944. It was revived again in 1947, filmed in 1950 and entered the amateur dramatic repertory, where it still receives the occasional airing. A television version was broadcast in 1981, which was a rare honour indeed for a British musical. Its presence in the musical theatre world was consequently much greater than the length of its short initial run in London would indicate.

In April 1945, just before peace was declared in Europe, Novello launched his next show at the Hippodrome. Drury Lane was still occupied by ENSA and the association of Novello with that theatre was broken in practice if not in the mind of the public. *Perchance to Dream* followed an affair through reincarnations of the lovers over three eras: Regency (1818), Victorian (1843) and contemporary ('193–?'). Novello was able to revel in period costumes, and romantic figures

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such as the masked highwayman, familiar to audiences through the style of films from the Gainsborough Studio and from the novels of Georgette Heyer and Daphne du Maurier. The show was further decorated with a ‘singing ballet’ called ‘The Triumphs of Spring’, while the music included the waltzes ‘Love Is My Reason’ and ‘Highwayman Love’, and a hugely popular pastiche of a Victorian parlour ballad, ‘We’ll Gather Lilacs’.

It was Noël Coward who relaunched Drury Lane after the war, perhaps remembering his great success in that theatre at the start of the 1930s with the celebratory pageant *Cavalcade*. The resulting work, *Pacific 1860*, which opened on 19 December 1946, is remembered as something of a disaster, set against a background of an unready and unheated theatre in the middle of a fearsome winter aggravated by fuel shortages and dominated by the miscasting of Mary Martin in the leading role of Elena Salvador. (Serious miscasting also blighted Coward’s 1954 show, *After the Ball*, in which his nostalgic remembrance of Mary Ellis’s singing proved as out-of-date as the show itself.) As Coward represented an important strand of British theatrical continuity across the divide of World War II, the faltering of such a high-profile work as *Pacific 1860* in London’s leading theatre for musicals made it a symbol of perceived British musical theatre decline. In retrospect the judgements of the time on *Pacific 1860* seem harsh. There is some wonderfully luxurious music in the score which, although not seeming as much of a whole as *Bitter Sweet*, still showed Coward to be inventive, and the work is no more indulgent or old-fashioned than the first American show that had opened in London after the war in March 1946, *Song of Norway*.

1947 and the ‘American Invasion’

The war changed the content and perception of West End musical theatre. A wartime combination of revivals of shows from up to thirty-five years previously with an absence of newer Broadway shows had held British musical theatre in a time warp of its own. London saw few new American musicals between 1939 and 1946, and contemporary Broadway was thus principally represented by Cole Porter (*Let’s Face It* and *DuBarry Was a Lady*, both 1942, and *Panama Hattie*, 1943). The first new American shows to be produced after the end of the war were the contrasting demotic comedy of *Follow the Girls* (1945), led in his own distinctive performing style by British comedian Arthur Askey, and *Song of Norway* (1946), whose subject matter, musical style, geographical setting, operetta influences and British casting made it

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seem anything but an American show. Consequently the impact of the first distinctively American show after the war – Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* in 1947, some four years after Broadway – was significantly heightened. The British public, worn down by years of war and deprivation, principally responded to the escapist image of vigorous youth, but at the same time incorporated other qualities of *Oklahoma!* to form the notion of a 'post-*Oklahoma!*' musical, a phrase much used at the time but never explicitly defined. Opening shortly after *Oklahoma!* was Irving Berlin's *Annie Get Your Gun*, with Dolores Gray in the role created on Broadway by Ethel Merman. Again it was rapturously received as the new type of American show and, as with *Oklahoma!*, the energy and style of performance were emphasised in reviews. In terms of construction and staging these two American shows were far apart: Berlin's show was an old-fashioned star vehicle using front cloths for scene changes and a ball in Act 2 that is reminiscent of a British pantomime walk-down finale; Rodgers and Hammerstein's work was more evenly balanced and tightly structured. Crucially in the West End, *Oklahoma!* began with an almost exclusively American cast with the perceived authentic spirit of youthful America. As the long run progressed, the casting gradually shifted to British performers but with no detriment to the show. *Annie Get Your Gun* only had two American performers from the start, Dolores Gray as Annie Oakley and Bill Johnson as Frank Butler. So, the performing energy may have been American in spirit but was very much British in execution.

Such distinctions matter. The arrival of *Oklahoma!* and *Annie Get Your Gun* created a sense of an 'American invasion', and the term is increasingly applied in the late 1940s as indicative of successful, integrated, modern musicals from America driving out of the West End the old-fashioned and feeble British shows. In fact it was not until 1953 that the production of new British musicals collapsed, principally because of the increasing lack of confidence of West End producers who preferred proven Broadway shows to the financial risks of unknown British ones. The idea that 'British = old' and 'American = new' was given a further spur into being by the long presence in the West End of a British work that had opened just a few weeks before *Annie Get Your Gun*. *Bless the Bride*, with book and lyrics by A. P. Herbert and music by Vivian Ellis (1904–96), was hugely successful and challenged the notion of an 'American invasion'; equally and paradoxically it probably also helped form the concept.

In one sense *Bless the Bride* seems to reinforce the idea that British musicals in the mid-1940s were old-fashioned. It tells the story of a young

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English girl, Lucy, in the Victorian England of 1870–71, during the lead-up to and outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war. She falls in love with a dashing Frenchman, Pierre, and elopes with him on the morning of her intended marriage to a stereotypical upper-class Englishman, the Honourable Thomas Trout. At the outbreak of the war Pierre joins the French army and Lucy returns to England, distraught. In the last act Pierre, previously thought lost in action, returns and they are reunited. The show capitalised on the period costumes and imagery of its Victorian setting, while Vivian Ellis's music adopts a Gilbert and Sullivan idiom, considerably more 'old-fashioned' than his work for shows before the war, but appropriate to the setting. The show dealt with the consequences of war, but through a sufficiently distant time to dilute the pain of the all-too-recent events, yet contemporary relevance was expressed through, for example, the maiden swept away by the foreign stranger (for which could be read GI), a song to Lucy from her nanny on the eve of her wedding that has more in common with the words of a mother to her son leaving for war, suspicion of foreigners and the eventual return from the dead of a loved one lost in action. Its concerns were specifically (but not exclusively) British, and A. P. Herbert made much of the ambiguous relationship between England and France in witty asides and exaggerated posturing in the script.

Vivian Ellis supported the themes of Herbert's libretto through music that built up its own patterns of national identity. The English are portrayed in foursquare rhythms and four-part harmony, suggesting a communal and socially rigid character, while the French are given freer melismatic lines in dance rhythms suggesting individuality and freedom. Two examples illustrate the point. The opening of the first act presents a croquet game on the lawn, set as a 6/8 pastorale, but the following introduction of the foreign game of 'tennis' (with licentious implications for the prudish British) is set to the equally foreign dance form of the polka. Later, when Pierre seduces Lucy in the shrubbery it is to another continental dance form, that of the waltz in the song 'I Was Never Kissed Before', again with sexually charged overtones, and contrasts strongly with the preceding constraint in Lucy's observations on her own engagement to Thomas Trout. With Trout she acts out of duty and the music is formal and restrained; with Pierre she is driven by emotion and her vocal line becomes increasingly free as the waltz number progresses under the encouragement of Pierre. Such contrasts throughout the work play subtly on British self-image and confidence in the face of Europe and the world. On the surface the show appears to be extremely dated, yet it had strong contemporary undercurrents for a British audience. If West End taste had shifted substantially towards

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American shows, then *Bless the Bride* should have failed quickly. Instead, it was hugely popular; but the production was taken off after more than two years while still playing to capacity houses because the theatre impresario C. B. Cochran wanted to try something new with the same creative team of Herbert, Ellis and director Wendy Toye. The subsequent work, *Tough at the Top*, was not the success for which Cochran had hoped.

The contrast of the plot, musical style and period design of *Bless the Bride* with those of *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Oklahoma!* was striking and reinforced the notion of 'English = old' and 'American = new'. Yet the appeal of the American works in the West End was escapist, while that of the British ones was a subtle reflection of matters still very close to the public psyche. *Bless the Bride* would have had more limited resonances on Broadway and so never transferred; the concerns of the show are those on an axis between Britain and Europe, not Britain and the United States. To juxtapose *Oklahoma!* and *Annie Get Your Gun* with *Bless the Bride* is thus to compare shows that were through subtext not intended to be on the same continent. However, the received reputation of *Bless the Bride* from some sixty years on is that of a 'Victorian' show failing to reach the length of run of the American import through its dated style and content. A London fringe revival in 1999 was rewritten and restructured by an American director to make the work more accessible. In fact, it removed precisely those elements which gave the work its initial appeal and dramatic motivation. The context of the show is both its strength as a theatrical work and its weakness in entering a contemporary active repertory.

The biggest indication that the West End and Broadway markets were not the same, and that there was a peculiarly British tradition of musical theatre, received its best expression immediately after the war in *King's Rhapsody* (1949), the last of Novello's musical romances. It included everything that was against the spirit of the 'American invasion' yet was a great success. Set in the Ruritanian country of 'Krasnia', it concerned princes, kings, marriages, mistresses and abdications. The music was lush, with 'Someday My Heart Will Awake' in the best Novello waltz-song tradition, and the set pieces included a dramatic coronation scene as the finale of the show. Importantly, it concerned one dominating feature of the British social structure, a focal point at the time of war and an institution that provided a sense of national unity: royalty. Central to *King's Rhapsody* is the prince with the foreign mistress who gives up his throne rather than lose her, and the abdication of Edward VIII was a recent memory in the late 1940s. In addition,

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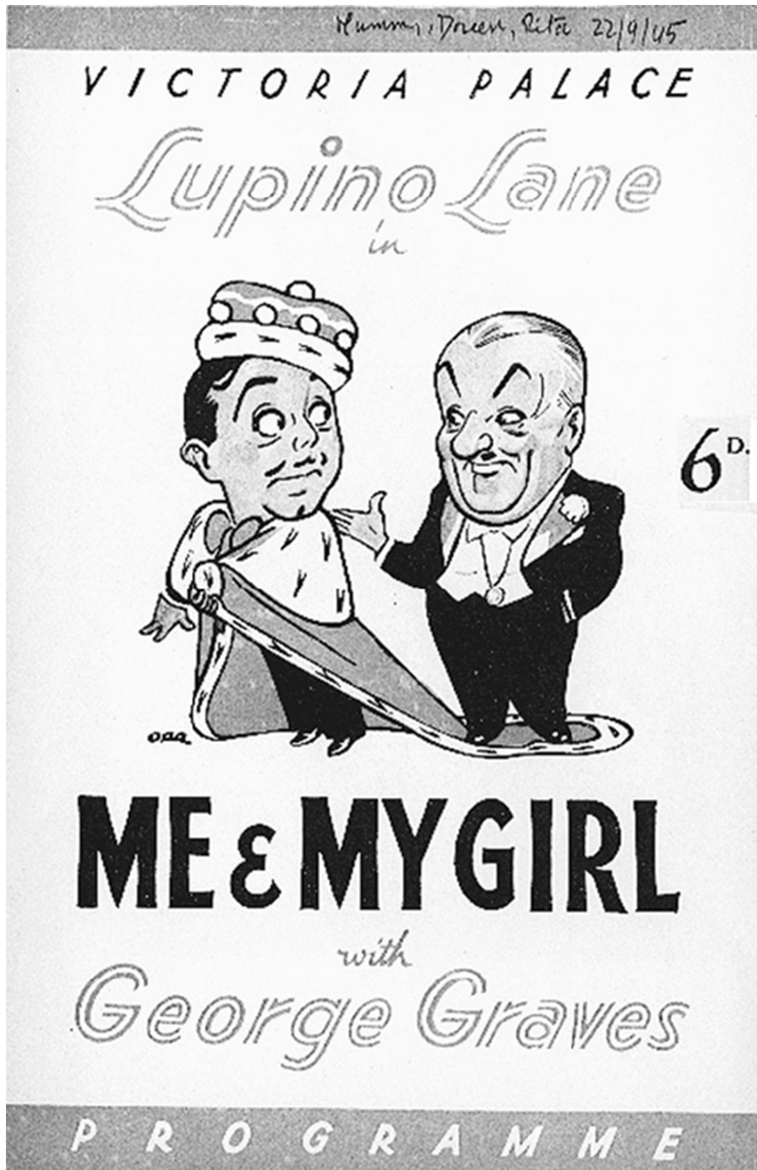

Plates 10–13 (10) Programme cover from the 1945 revival at the Victoria Palace of *Me and My Girl* (original premiere 16 December 1937, Victoria Palace). The design is the same as the original cover and Lupino Lane starred in both productions. Photograph from private programme collection of John Snelson (11) Programme cover from the original production of *Bless the Bride* (26 April 1947, Adelphi Theatre). Photograph from private programme collection of John Snelson (12) Programme cover from the original production of *Gay's the Word* (16 February 1951, Saville Theatre). Photograph from private programme collection of John Snelson (13) Programme cover from *Expresso Bongo* (23 April 1958, Saville Theatre). Photograph from private programme collection of John Snelson

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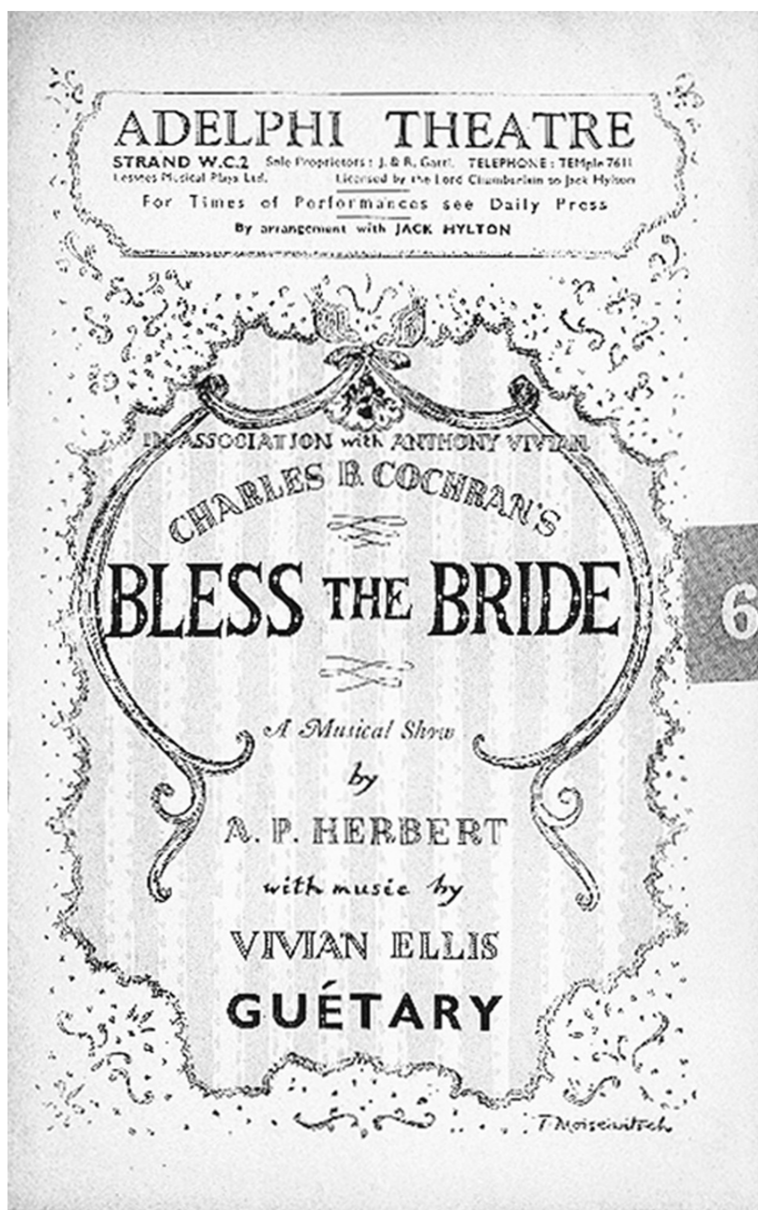

Plates 10–13 (cont.)

reference to living people was restricted under the Lord Chamberlain's censorship of the stage at the time, while the portrayal of royalty of the past couple of centuries was forbidden. Consequently, the use of the royal settings of European operetta had become one of the ways in which the British could see expressed on stage issues relating to royalty, and anything that presented the emotions and personal lives

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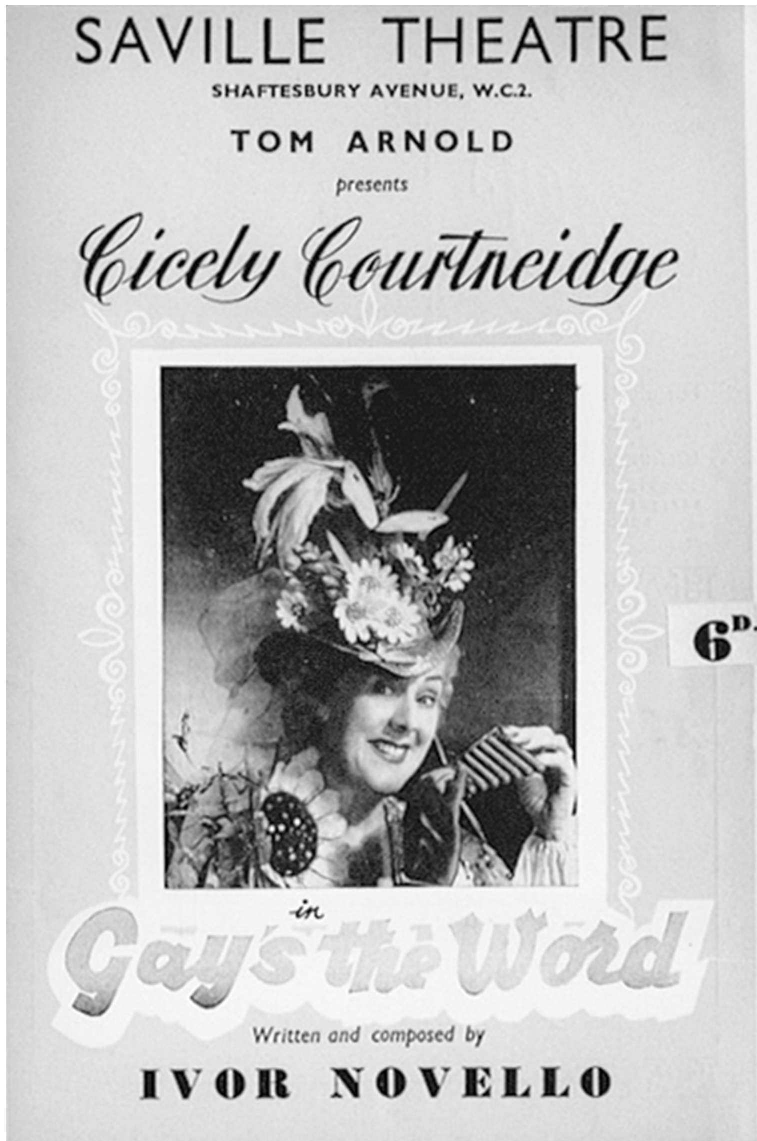

Plates 10–13 (cont.)

of these revered and distant figures was thus tantalising.[3] This aspect of the show's appeal is peculiarly British, and it is hardly surprising from this perspective that one of the great West End successes of the immediate post-war years was never considered a candidate for Broadway.

King's Rhapsody maintained its popularity throughout its two-and-a-half-year run, with Novello playing the central character of Prince Nikki up until his sudden death from a heart attack just hours after his

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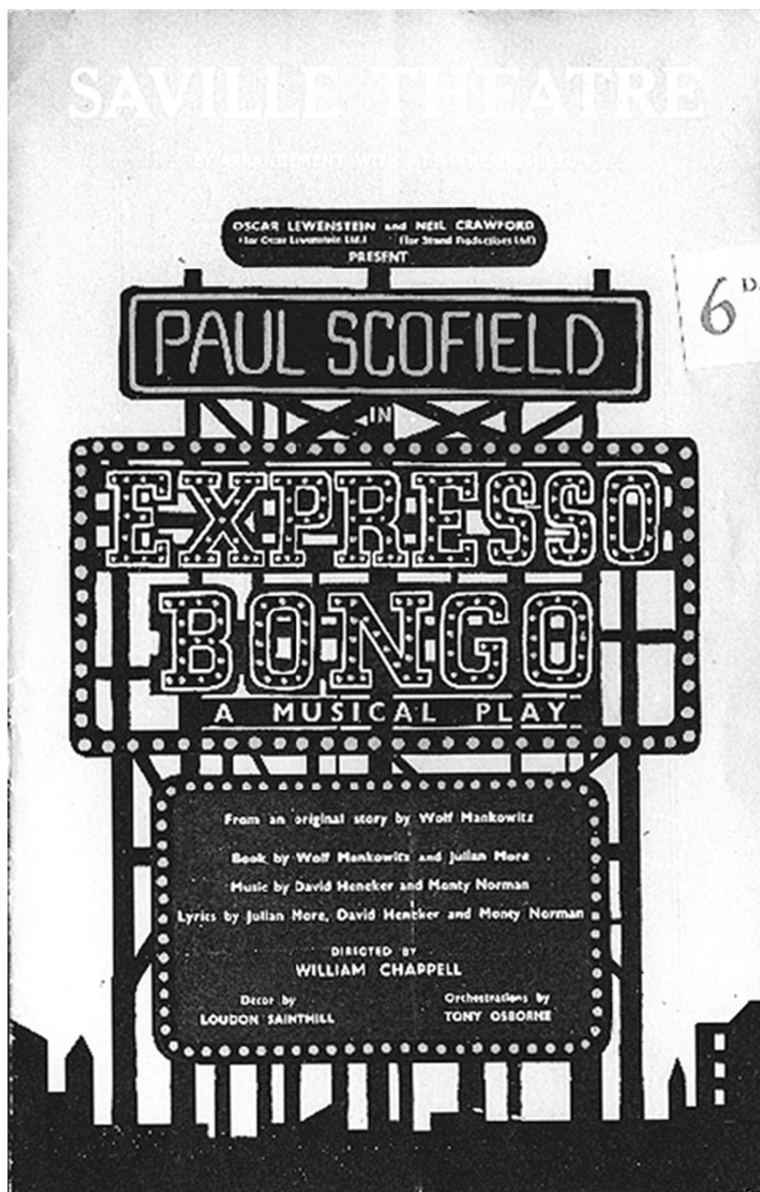

Plates 10–13 (cont.)

performance on Monday, 5 March 1951. Obviously the presence of Novello in the cast was a huge draw, but it ran for a further seven months after Novello's death with his role played by another West End legend, Jack Buchanan. At the time of the show's eventual closure, box-office receipts confirm that a steady public interest had been maintained at near capacity despite this substitution in the central role. The show could have run in the West End for much longer, but it went on tour from October 1951

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until June 1952, still to great acclaim. A film was made in 1955 with Errol Flynn, past his best, in the Novello role. The music was altered so that no number was heard in full and the dubious talents of Anna Neagle did little for the role of the mistress. To compare this with the remarkably faithful and painstaking adaptation to screen of *Oklahoma!*, released in the same year, is to appreciate how much the British repertory has suffered through an ongoing inaccessibility as a result of a lack of good – or indeed any – significant screen adaptations until those of *Half a Sixpence* (1967) and *Oliver!* (1968). While key works of the American repertory are available today on video there is no similar access to British works of the same period.

In the 1940s and 1950s America represented to the British the escapist, the optimistic, the future, all in strong contrast to the daily bleak reality of the after-effects of the war. Not surprisingly British writers of musicals addressed their home audience through the home concerns of the day, particularly those of post-war recovery and sometimes the perceived lack of it. This introversion not only accounts for the impenetrability of some shows at the time to foreign visitors but also explains their increasing irrelevance to more modern generations. Such domestic concerns, although present as subtext (e.g. *Bless the Bride*), were also presented explicitly. In 1949 Cicely Courtneidge starred in the musical play *Her Excellency* as a woman ambassador to a South American country, whose main purpose was to secure a meat supply contract for Britain. In many respects the plot foreshadows that of *Call Me Madam*, but whereas a British audience could understand many of the topical references to American financial imperialism towards Europe in Howard Lindsay and Russell Crouse's American book, the British topical references in Archie Menzies and Harold Purcell's book defeated American understanding.

The subplot of *Her Excellency* involves the selling of British furniture to Latin America as part of the British export drive, while the main plot revolves around the British ambassador beating the American ambassador in securing the beef supply contract. Some of the jokes are still funny, but much of the script was concerned with topical references that cannot be understood outside the context of food rationing, which had been introduced soon after the start of the war and was only completely discontinued in 1954.[4] The particular circumstances of 1947–48 inspired the context of the show as the meat ration hit its lowest level since the start of wartime rationing. The direct supply of beef to Britain from Argentina and not via the canning factories of the United States (as a part of Lend-Lease) was thus a theme of strong practical and symbolic value to a British audience in 1949. The language of the show

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also invokes symbols of England, with the song 'Sunday Morning in England' evoking a national image that played on both a strong and proud past and a tired and run-down present. A crisis of confidence in the country comes through in many British shows of the period as they seek to address the long-term effects of World War II, particularly in the patriotic bolstering of national spirit. For example, *Tough at the Top* portrays a European princess enamoured of all things English (especially an attractive boxer) and who sings that 'England Is a Lovely Place'; in 1954 Harry Parr Davies's setting and Christopher Hassall's lyrics emote 'I Leave My Heart in an English Garden' (*Dear Miss Phoebe*, 1954). While these expressions of patriotism were hardly new – Ivor Novello's 'Rose of England' from *Crest of the Wave* is perhaps the best example of all – the grim aftermath of the war required an additional dose of them.

Such nationalistic sentiment does not chime well with a modern audience, set against the tainting of patriotism with the racist and bigoted overtones of recent decades and the increasingly ambiguous position of the United Kingdom in relation to mainland Europe. Again, the contemporary strength of these works has proved a latter-day handicap. Generally the judgement of West End musicals after World War II has been viewed from a Broadway-led agenda which has denied these British shows their own home character, yet it is precisely this character that explains why British shows such as *Bless the Bride, Her Excellency* and *King's Rhapsody* could be successful despite being apparently so out of step with the prevailing notion of a modern 'post-*Oklahoma!*' musical.

The 1950s

Any retrospective look at the West End musical in the first half of the 1950s makes for uncomfortable reading from a British perspective. Contrasted with the American imports of *Carousel, Kiss Me, Kate, South Pacific, Call Me Madam, Guys and Dolls, The King and I* and *Pal Joey, Wonderful Town* and *Kismet* are indigenous shows such as *Ace of Clubs* (Coward), *Golden City* (John Toré), *Dear Miss Phoebe* (Harry Parr Davies), *Gay's the Word* (Novello), *Zip Goes a Million* (George Posford), *Wild Thyme* (Donald Swann), *The Water Gipsies* (Vivian Ellis) and *A Girl Called Jo* (John Pritchett). Nothing of this British repertory has survived, while the American imports are mostly 'classics'.

There was an awareness at the time of a difference in style between British and American musicals and two British shows in particular adapted American models in response. In *Golden City* (1950) John Toré wrote

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a work that was essentially a copy of *Oklahoma!*, adapted to suit the different cultural resonances of a London audience. In the place of the Oklahoman frontier was that of South Africa; instead of farmers and cowboys there were the opposing groups of farmers and miners; the rustic dance of 'The Farmer and the Cowman' became the communal barbecue of 'Braavleis'. The music also used the features of contemporary American shows: 'It's Love, My Darling, It's Love' is a clear copy of the ideas and style of *Oklahoma!*'s 'People Will Say We're In Love', *Annie Get Your Gun*'s 'The Girl That I Marry' was transmuted into 'The Prettiest Girl in the Town', while the 'Oklahoma!' chorus itself became 'It's a Great Occasion', complete with high sustained chords for the women's voices, and the chanting of 'trekkin', ridin'' to match the now familiar rhythmic 'Ok-la-ho-ma' of that title song's arrangement. In *Gay's the Word* (1951) Novello changed direction by writing for Cicely Courtneidge rather than himself (he was still performing in *King's Rhapsody*), and this provided an opportunity to adopt a different style, one through which he made the perceived contrasts between British and American shows the substance of the show itself. His ultimate conclusion as presented in *Gay's the Word* was that a confident style of presentation and energy in performance were lacking in British musical theatre at the time, a state further aggravated by a lack of respect for the individuality of British theatrical history. These were far more significant concerns than any notion of changing content. By creating for Courtneidge the character of Gay Daventry, a middle-aged musical comedy star, he was able to juxtapose images of bad old shows and good new shows as part of the dramatic construction. He also surprised his audiences through music that adopted a more popular American idiom, so much so that distinct models can be found for most of the numbers: the show's theme song 'Vitality' is clearly related to 'Another Op'nin', Another Show', the romantic ballad 'If Only He'd Looked My Way' shares crucial similarities of melody and harmony with 'Some Enchanted Evening', while the Novello waltz 'A Matter of Minutes' is not the expected broad sweeping melody but adopts a fast, short-phrased and repetitive structure indebted to Richard Rodgers. As with the theme of rationing in *Her Excellency*, the subject matter of *Gay's the Word* was not suited to export. While a battle between indigenous British musicals and imported American ones became a topic of some heat in the West End, it was an irrelevance for Broadway at that time. In addition to the show's strictly contemporary theme, its reliance on the skills of one unique comic performer and the current ambiguity of the title have contributed to the difficulties for any attempt at revival.

In 1953, however, the effects of an 'American invasion' were felt most strongly, with only two new British shows, one a disaster called *Happy as*

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a King, led by the much-loved comedian Fred Emney, and a musical pageant *The Glorious Days* which capitalised on the fervour of the coronation year by having Anna Neagle play Nell Gwynn and Queen Victoria (both young and old). The Lord Chamberlain was sympathetic towards a slight relaxation of the conventions governing the presentation of royal personages on stage in the year that Elizabeth II became queen and justified Neagle's portrayals in this show on the grounds that the drama took place in the imagination of a girl who had been knocked out during an air raid, and so was an imagined not actual portrayal of the queen![5] The American productions that opened in the same year were *Paint Your Wagon, Guys and Dolls, The King and I* and *Wish You Were Here*, although most of their leading performers were British, in contrast to the position of some five years before. Only *Guys and Dolls* relied on leading American performers, with Isobel Bigley, Sam Levene and Stubby Kaye recreating their Broadway roles.

The effect of censorship on British writers is shown indirectly by comparison through the response of the Lord Chamberlain's office to the production of the American show *Wish You Were Here* and in a lesser way to *Call Me Madam*. The reader for the Lord Chamberlain completely missed the point of the social setting of the former work by Harold Rome, Arthur Kobler and Joshua Logan, equating it with the British family holiday camp of Butlins rather than an exclusive setting for priapic American youth. The only change required by the Lord Chamberlain was the replacement of a reference to the Duke of Windsor. The need to remove his name was simply because of its existence. There was nothing in its context that was in any way offensive; it was, if anything, complimentary to the duke by including him in a list of famous and influential world figures. Four months after the show opened a single complaint from a member of the public over its supposed decadent nature prompted a visit from a representative of the Lord Chamberlain's office, whose report makes for humorous reading today as each piece of dubious or suggestive movement is described in excessive detail.[6] The presentation of the show was subsequently toned down by order. In *Call Me Madam* a reference to Princess Margaret Rose had to be removed (simply because it existed) while the representation in the show of the real American congressman Dean Acheson was allowed on the grounds that it had not been objected to in America. In Britain the representation of real people was often prohibited, especially where offence could be taken by foreign powers, and such restrictions provided a challenge to the development of satire. By effectively banning the presentation of a real monarchy, political figures and any sense of sex (as opposed to idealised romance), the British musicals were inevitably behind the times when compared with the

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American ones whose censorship in London was more limited through a lack of understanding (as with *Wish You Were Here*) or a bending of rules.[7] American writers for the musical stage were more free to represent contemporary life than British counterparts who existed in a long-established culture of compliance in which rules of censorship were subconsciously learned or actively considered at an early stage of writing. The play, rather than the musical, was generally the battleground for contentious matters. It was only after the challenges to the Lord Chamberlain through straight theatre in the second half of the 1950s that the British musical began to escape this self-censorship, and with *Expresso Bongo* (discussed later) jumped forward decades in a single show.

What was perceived as a strike back at the American repertory began in 1954 with *The Boy Friend* (Sandy Wilson, 1924–2014) and *Salad Days* (music by Julian Slade, 1930–2006; book and lyrics by Slade and Dorothy Reynolds). Both musicals were conceived as small-scale works for the specific companies of the Players' Theatre and the Bristol Old Vic respectively. In their different ways they present a particular sense of archetypal Britishness. In the case of *The Boy Friend*, although primarily a tribute to musical comedies of the 1920s, finishing schools, debutantes, aristocrats in disguise all played to notions of class, particularly upper-class, behaviour. *Salad Days* drew on the rarefied idyll of a Cambridge college, the select world of undergraduates and family connections that extended to Whitehall. Both shows are also sexless, although sexuality through the codified language of a gay subculture casts a subtle shade. While *Wish You Were Here* was overtly displaying a cast of mostly sexually rampant semi-clad youths, the British response was to summarise romantic relations with a chaste kiss or two. One of the most well-known songs in *Salad Days* declares that 'We Said We Wouldn't Look Back', yet it is gently ironic in that the reminder not to be nostalgic prompts in the lyrics exactly that which it aspires to eschew. This duality of view, the present as interpreted through the past, is a common strand in British musicals, and *Salad Days* and *The Boy Friend* did look back in both musical and dramatic ways. *Salad Days* was conceived as an entertaining, ephemeral diversion, at the heart of which is a nostalgic innocence conjuring up an affectionate cartoon of certain English stereotypes. Whereas the passion of *West Side Story* invokes death, the 'romance' of *Salad Days* remains chaste. The lyrics of *Salad Days* are equally one dimensional while its music is inoffensive, with diatonic (often pentatonic) melodies, simple harmony and the most straightforward of verse–refrain structures.

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The Boy Friend was revised and extended from an original one-act version and eventually entered a mainstream West End theatre at Wyndhams in January 1954, running there for a month over five years; *Salad Days* went into the Vaudeville in August 1954 and stayed there until 1960. Consequently, for the second half of the 1950s, the most enduring image of the British musical was of something with the parochial virtues of the village hall in *Salad Days* or the over-refined, nostalgic atmosphere of a fictitious and glamorised 1920s in *The Boy Friend*. For an American audience on Broadway in the mid-1950s – or, for that matter, all through the United States by virtue of extensive touring – *The Boy Friend* represented the only contact with contemporary British musical theatre and so reinforced the perception of a dated and retrospective British style. These two musicals are about all that remains active today of the British musical theatre repertory of the 1950s. Their continuing popularity is partly accounted for by their dramatic lightness, adaptability for performance and inoffensive natures, making them safe for school productions and amateurs. Both have received very occasional professional revivals, but only *The Boy Friend* has achieved an international dimension to its fame.

That *The Boy Friend* has been taken to be a leading example of the British musical in the 1950s is, however, in one sense particularly apt. The music of the show is derivative, using – albeit most skilfully – older styles. This approach is a constant of British musical theatre. Novello consciously borrowed from a range of sources including classical music, Viennese operetta and certain characteristics of Richard Rodgers. Vivian Ellis's later works adopted period styles appropriate to their dramatic settings, while Coward relied strongly on Victorian parlour music and music hall styles throughout his works. No specific sound characterised the West End. The search for that distinctive voice brought about the chameleon-like shifts of Coward and the last change of direction (or return to his musical youth in one sense) for Novello.

Despite the impression given by the longest-running British musicals, the second half of the 1950s was a lively period for British theatre as a whole. John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) has become a symbol for the beginning of a move towards greater realism in theatre, although subject to some of the same over-stressed importance that *Oklahoma!* has received. The inoffensive styles of Slade and Wilson in their first big successes contrasted with the increasingly serious intent of other contemporary theatre works, especially those of the more politically driven theatre as characterised by Joan Littlewood's theatre company at Stratford East whose demotic show of 1959 (note that *Salad Days* ran until

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1960), *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be*, contrasted an East End working class complete with resident prostitute with *Salad Days*'s middle-class 'niceness'. Yet for all the supposed realism of *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be*, it shared with the Slade and Wilson shows a common naivety towards characters (as with the camp interior designer) and a certain predictability in the music. *Fings* extended the reputation of the up-and-coming songwriter Lionel Bart (1930–99) and only shortly preceded his international success *Oliver!* in 1960. Julian Slade followed up *Salad Days* with another escapist work, *Free as Air* (1957), but the conditions that had made inconsequential escapism a surprise hit in 1954 were sufficient only to sustain an existing reputation, not to support a new one. Wilson's attempt to adapt the novellas of Ronald Firbank as *Valmouth* (1959) became a cult success, although the baroque excesses of Firbank's characters proved too strange for a wider audience.

A further contemporary antidote to any British nostalgia was provided by *Grab Me a Gondola* (1956; with music by James Gilbert), whose central character was based on the British 'sex-bomb' Diana Dors. More significantly David Heneker and Monty Norman's *Expresso Bongo* (1958) laid into the world of the pop singer and teenage heart-throb, bringing contemporary pop styles into the theatre along with the first electric guitar in a West End pit orchestra. (Amplified acoustic guitars had been in use at least since 1950.) *Expresso Bongo* is remarkable for the cynicism of its characterisations, which include the pelvis-thrusting singer 'Bongo' Herbert, 'Me' who is a crooked agent ripping off Bongo's strictly limited talent and a predatory older actress keen to boost her own flagging career through some fame by association. One number proclaims that 'There's nothing wrong with British youth today', while comprehensively listing all the problems created in the world (most notably the atom bomb) caused by their own parents. It was compared to *Pal Joey* in the unpleasant range of its characters and hailed as the show in which the British musical grew up. The film version (1959) had Cliff Richard in the role of the pop idol, but the plot and style were so diluted as to undermine the thrust of the whole show, and the most punchy of the musical numbers were cut from the film's release. Again, the future was deprived of a suitable advocate for an innovative show. The Lord Chamberlain's office teased out every innuendo it could from the book and lyrics but failed to dilute the central message. The sexual puns in *Pal Joey* had not been censored for the West End in 1954, but four years later *Expresso Bongo* had to fight over many lines. Deference to the Lord Chamberlain was fast being replaced by cheeky rebellion, such that the alternative suggested by the authors to the censored line 'Go and stuff herself' was 'Go and screw herself'. They settled on 'Get lost'.

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Expresso Bongo opened in the West End in the same year as *My Fair Lady*. It did not run as long and it has hardly been seen since, but its gritty cynicism, contemporary setting and pop score gained it many fans. It was voted Best British Musical of the Year in a *Variety* annual survey of shows on the London stage, with a ballot result far ahead of *My Fair Lady*, and was referred to in general as 'the other musical' to distinguish it from Lerner and Loewe's work. A London view of the musical in 1958 reverses the usual historical assumption in that the new American success was a costume and period work whereas the new British success was utterly contemporary in its characters, setting, plot, language and music.

The 1960s

The energy and confidence of the new wave of musical theatre writers that emerged in the late 1950s carried through to the 1960s, as three British musicals gained both UK and US success. Bart's adaptation of Dickens in *Oliver!* ran for just over six years in the West End (June 1961–September 1966) and for more than a year and a half on Broadway (January 1963–September 1964). The show was set almost a century before the 1920s of *The Boy Friend*, but it felt theatrically contemporary in contrast to Wilson's period recreation. Importantly, Bart's background as a writer of pop songs brought a musical style that enabled the number 'As long as he needs me' to become a popular standard, covered by such performers as Judy Garland, Sarah Vaughan, Shirley Bassey and Liberace. The small-scale revue echoed the trend. Anthony Newley (1931–99) wrote and headed the cast for *Stop the World – I Want to Get Off*, which provided the contemporary hit songs 'What kind of fool am I' and 'The Joker'. The show ran in London (July 1961–November 1962) before transferring to Broadway (October 1962–September 1963). Completing this transatlantic trio is *Half a Sixpence*, whose lead role was played both in London (March 1963–October 1964) and on Broadway (April 1965–July 1966) by British rock 'n' roll idol Tommy Steele. *Half a Sixpence* came from the same creative stable as *Expresso Bongo*, with music and lyrics by David Heneker. These shows emphasise a decisive shift in British musical theatre towards a generation culturally post-war, rooted in the emerging youth culture of the 1950s.

These shows do not bring the British narrative back into the comfortable musical theatre mainstream and thus reassert a familiar Broadway-centred hegemony. Instead, each has a partner work that suggests otherwise through the lack of correlation between West End

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and Broadway success. During the long London run of *Oliver!* Bart's large-scale musical *Blitz!* ran for 568 performances (May 1962–September 1953). For similar concurrent success for a composer at this scale in British West End musical theatre, we have to look back to Ivor Novello or forward to Andrew Lloyd Webber. But the title alone helps explain why there was no likelihood of an American production. The story is set during the bombing of London in World War II and portrays the indomitable community spirit engendered by 'the Blitz'. It engaged the memories of many of the London audience through the safe nostalgia of a shared crisis survived. As with the shows of Ellis and Novello, the attraction and appeal in London was inextricably tied to a particular British experience that did not make for easy export.

David Heneker, in collaboration with John Taylor, wrote the score for *Charlie Girl*, which ran for 2,202 performances (December 1965–March 1971). The score has all the catchiness of *Half a Sixpence*, but with updated jazz and swing idioms, and a rousing title song that could give Jerry Herman's 'Hello, Dolly' a run for its money. It has a mix of vaudeville-inspired novelty numbers, popular lyricism and chorus punch, orchestrated in a manner such that the score draws parallels with Herman's near-contemporary Broadway show. But the story is an updated amalgam of *Me and My Girl* and the Cinderella trope, throwing together contemporary youth culture and a heavily contrasting parental generation, with love across social class juxtaposing the aristocratic and the low brow. Joe Brown, a young pop singer who became famous with hits in the late 1950s, took the lovable cockney role, which included a number aping musical hall sing-a-long – as with 'Oom Pah Pah' in *Oliver!* and 'Flash-Bang-Wallop' in *Half a Sixpence* – this time praising the British dietary institution of 'Fish 'n Chips'. The inclusion in the cast of British stage and film legend Anna Neagle added to the show's appeal to a broad audience. But the combination of cultural resonances and references in *Charlie Girl* that played so strongly to the West End public offered little easy resonance with an American audience beyond the generic romance of the plot and any general appeal of a song and dance format. Indeed, the American lothario of the plot is set up for a fall. Assertion of Britishness over American values is part of the show's identity and as such portrays similar stances towards national identity as had *Zip Goes a Million*.

Newley's follow up to *Stop the World – I Want to Get Off* was another small-scale, revue-style show, *The Roar of the Greasepaint – The Smell of the Crowd*. It opened on Broadway for a short run of 232 performances with Newley's heading of the cast in May 1963 a significant factor in it reaching New York. The show had closed in Britain during the

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out-of-town try-outs, during which film star and comedian Norman Wisdom had played the lead role.

Other shows reinforce the London–New York differences. *Robert and Elizabeth* (music by Ron Grainer, 1922–81; book and lyrics by Ronald Miller), based on the true-life romance of poets Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett, was a musical-operetta hybrid, with coloratura soprano heroine whose triumphant number 'Woman and Man' is a showstopper. Following popularity with London audiences, plans began for a New York transfer but were dashed by the prospect of legal complications: the West End presence was notable, the Broadway presence was nonexistent. The Dickensian theme of *Oliver!* found further expression in *Pickwick*, lyrics by Bricusse, this time working with composer Cyril Ornadel (1924–2011). It yielded the successful song 'If I ruled the world' and achieved almost 700 performances in the West End (July 1963–February 1965). Popular British comedian Harry Secombe brought his operatic-styled tenor voice to the title role and also led the cast in its lacklustre Broadway run of just 56 performances in 1965. The cultural nostalgia of Dickens and the caricature figures in an inevitably episodic work (as the nature of Dickens's novel *The Pickwick Papers* invites) generated some interest on Broadway, but the strengths of *Oliver!* in script, production and performance invited criticism through comparison. As the fame of the star personality heading the cast had been founded on anarchic radio comedy in Britain, this brought no friendly audience recognition abroad.

The last work here to highlight the different expectations between West End and Broadway audiences, *Canterbury Tales*, came in 1968 with the unlikely combination of poetry by Geoffrey Chaucer and a score by Richard Hill and John Hawkins which combined contemporary rock and pop elements with medieval music qualities. (Literary scholar Neville Coghill with Martin Starkie dramatised the medieval source.) A transatlantic comparison makes the point: 2,080 performances in London, but just 122 on Broadway in 1969.

Conclusion

World War II interrupted the development of British musical theatre and led to a postwar dichotomy between the need to take up again and develop the interrupted past as an assertion of continuity and the need to embrace change in a world that could not be the same again. In musical theatre the British writers understandably tended to address the former need, while the imported American shows addressed for a British audience the latter.

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The focus of America was on America; the focus of Britain was on Britain. Not surprisingly the traffic in shows across the Atlantic was almost exclusively one way as the British works had social and political dimensions aligned to a national mood that was neither interesting nor comprehensible to an American audience. Furthermore, the different aspirations of homegrown and imported West End shows were judged by the same criteria as their American counterparts, although fulfilling different functions. The consequence of this approach towards their contemporary and subsequent interpretation and comparison has been seen in a reinforcement of an American-led musical theatre canon in Britain. In 1956 Vivian Ellis was moved to head an article for *Plays and Players* 'Give Us a Chance', which was 'an eloquent plea for the British composer, who is generally denied all the opportunities open to his American rival'.[8] In addition, the repertory has remained inaccessible owing to a lack of quality films of British stage shows and to a more limited representation on record than American ones; subsequent transfers from 78 to LP have been negligible, and CD releases followed only in the mid-2000s as copyrights expired. This lack of exposure has prevented the development of an easy familiarity with some of the best works, and the resulting lack of opportunity to learn the canon has in turn reinforced its undeserved obscurity. The British shows of the 1960s that also had US productions have achieved wider recognition. However, taking such transatlantic status as an arbiter of West End significance distorts, distracts and detracts from both national and genre narratives.

There are distinctive British characteristics that run through the musicals from pre-war to post-war and even into the much-shifted cultural landscape of the 1960s. Retrospection plays a part in plots as well as through the remnants of music-hall and revue styles. Popular music hall sing-along provided hit numbers even into the 1950s and 1960s, for Bart and Heneker in particular. Coward's tendency towards allusion and clever lyrics often comes to the fore in British musicals, most directly in the works of Sandy Wilson. Novello's thumbprints continue through to shows by Andrew Lloyd Webber, often with the large-scale and the visual as strong components within an overt theatricality. Musically both fit into a broader continuum of adaptable musical styles that draw on the contemporary alongside a trait for nostalgia, especially in the tendencies of the 'big tunes' – 'Rose of England' and 'Someday My Heart Will Awake' for Novello, 'She's too Far above Me' for Heneker', 'I Know Now' for Grainer or 'Music of the Night' for Lloyd Webber.

Knowledge of the past is important to the understanding of both the content and the appeal of the British musical mid-century, and the reassertion of its individuality as distinct from Broadway is a revealing

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consequence of this. Although 'we said we wouldn't look back', in the case of this particular repertory, we should.

Notes

1. For a brief narrative of the major British shows, their creators and performers, see Andrew Lamb, *150 Years of Popular Musical Theatre* (New Haven, 2000).
2. For a study of Mayerl's significance more widely to British popular music, see Peter Dickinson, *Marigold: The Music of Billy Mayerl* (Oxford, 1999).
3. For a historical placing and explanation of the meaning of the monarchy to British society in this period, see David Cannadine, 'The Context, Performing and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the "Invention of Tradition", c. 1820–1977', in *The Invention of Tradition,* ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Thomas Ranger (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 101–64, esp. pp. 139–55; and Tom Nairn, 'Britain's Royal Romance', in *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity,* vol. 3: *National Fictions*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London, 1989), pp. 77–86.
4. For a thorough examination of the effects of rationing on Britain, see Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls and Consumption 1939–55* (Oxford, 2000).
5. For Neagle's association with the role of Queen Victoria on film, see Marcia Landy, *British Genres: Cinema and Society 1930–1960* (Princeton, 1991), pp. 68–69; and Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930–39* (London, 1984), pp. 116–17. For a brief assessment of the importance of Neagle in British film as a performing embodiment of the best of British womanhood (and hence as an appropriate candidate for the portrayal of royalty), see Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to Dad's Army* (Manchester, 1997), p. 132.
6. British Library: Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence file (7 July 1953), report of visiting inspector R. J. Hill, 28 January 1954. (The apparent discrepancy in dates is due to the fact that each Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence file is dated from the issuing of the licence for performance. After a show had received its licence and opened, there was usually little additional correspondence; in this particular case, however, extra correspondence was occasioned by a complaint from a member of the public which thus had to be investigated.) Hill begins his report by stating that 'the entire theme is promiscuity, euphemized as "having fun". . . [T]he theme as developed in dialogue is passable, but when translated into action occasionally goes a long way past the preliminaries of intercourse that ought to be acceptable for public presentation.' After a lengthy and remarkably detailed description of various actions and positions of the cast, Hill concludes 'that if anything could reconcile me to a life in Moscow, it would be the prospect of an alternative life at "Camp Karefree"'.
7. The effects of censorship by the Lord Chamberlain's Office on musicals in particular have received little attention. For a general background to its effects on theatre in Britain in the twentieth century, see Nicholas de Jongh, *Politics, Prudery and Perversions: The Censoring of the English Stage 1901–1968* (London, 2000).
8. Vivian Ellis, 'Give Us a Chance', *Plays and Players* (January 1956), p. 17.

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