

## 16 'In this England, in these times': Redefining the British Musical since 1970

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In the last decades of the twentieth century, West End musicals exploded onto the world stage through a series of box office hits such as *Cats* (1981), *Starlight Express* (1984), *Les Misérables* (1985), *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986) and *Miss Saigon* (1989). Subsequently, the term 'British musical' has become somewhat synonymous with large-scale commercial shows that feature epic storylines and themes, striking designs and scores that draw on contemporary pop and rock influences. But while these commercial hits have undoubtedly had an enormous impact on perceptions of the British musical at home and abroad, they form only part of a wider story of the evolution of musicals in Britain from the 1970s to the present. This period has seen the gradual development – at first sporadic and later more strategic – of musical theatre as an integral part of the British theatre scene. This chapter explores the key elements in this evolution in terms of individual shows, artists and companies and the start of a national infrastructure for nurturing British musicals.

### Experimentation and Consolidation: British Musicals in the 1970s

By the 1970s the Broadway musical had evolved into a mainstream art form with recognisable structural, thematic and musical elements. In Britain, however, there was a more ad hoc approach to writing musicals which allowed for a great deal of experimentation. Many writers were of course influenced by American shows, but without feeling the need to adhere strictly to the conventions that had built up around it in terms of tone, musical styles, design and staging vocabulary.

This led to an eclectic musical theatre scene that combined a heavy reliance on American imports with home-grown shows based on British source materials. In 1973 alone, new British musicals included *The Card*, adapted from a 1909 Arnold Bennett novel; *R loves J* (1973), adapted from Peter Ustinov's 1959 play *Romanoff and Juliet* which re-framed Shakespeare's play in the context of Russian and American diplomatic families; and *Jeeves*, an adaptation of the P. G. Wodehouse stories with

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music by Andrew Lloyd Webber and book and lyrics by playwright Alan Ayckbourn. One of the biggest successes of this era was *Billy* (1974), an adaptation of Keith Waterhouse's 1959 novel *Billy Liar* about a bored young working-class clerk in Yorkshire who fantasises about life in the big city as a comedy writer. With a book by sitcom writers Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais, music by film composer John Barry and lyrics by Don Black, the show opened at the Palace Theatre in Manchester before going on to a successful West End run with a cast that included Michael Crawford, Elaine Paige, Peter Bowles and Diana Quick.

While Broadway directors at this time tended to come from within the musical theatre community, subsidised theatres such as the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) provided a training ground for the leading British directors and designers of 1980s musicals. Director Trevor Nunn, whose later musical theatre credits include *Cats*, *Les Misérables*, *Starlight Express* and *Sunset Boulevard*, spent the 1970s honing his craft at the RSC with imaginative large-cast productions of the classics that emphasised both strict respect for text and a commitment to engaging theatricality. In 1976 his dual interest in the classics and popular entertainment led to a musical adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* that featured an unorthodox mix of artists with the book, lyrics and direction by Nunn, music by Guy Woolfenden (the RSC's in-house head of music), a cast of classical RSC actors including Michael Williams, Roger Rees and Judi Dench, and choreography by Gillian Lynne (who would go on to choreograph *Cats* for Nunn five years later). Critic Anthony Everitt called the production 'a cross between classic farce, musical comedy and circus clowning',<sup>1</sup> while Sheridan Morley saw it as a 'straightforward musical comedy perched somewhere between *Zorba!* and *Godspell*', noting that

the plot unravels itself in comic opera style with dictators in dark glasses, open-air film shows and souvenir sellers competing for our attention. Gillian Lynne's choreography takes us back into that lost world of *Grab Me A Gondola* and all the other kitsch musicals of the 1950s while the cast . . . indulge themselves and us in a sustained triumph of showbiz over Shakespeare.<sup>2</sup>

The overall effect was of an enjoyable ensemble show where the story-telling took precedence over stand-alone showstoppers, with critic Irving Wardle pointing out that 'Guy Woolfenden's score knows its place. It does not give you much to hum on the way out, but it supplies an admirable springboard into dramatic song and dance.'<sup>3</sup>

This project – while clearly a light-hearted venture – highlights some of the key components of many British musical theatre productions in the

following decades, including a rigorous approach to textual analysis, the director's right to reinterpret revered texts for modern audiences and an emphasis on nurturing actors who were skilled in finding both light and shade through an intimate understanding of the text. Everitt notes in particular the ability of a classically trained actress such as Judi Dench in this final regard: 'She puts her talent for pathos at the service of laughter: her plight is all the funnier for the anguished embarrassment with which she responds to it.'<sup>4</sup>

The sense of ensemble work was even more evident in the company's 1980 production of *Nicholas Nickleby* – an epic 8½ hour adaptation of the Dickens novel directed by Trevor Nunn and John Caird. Their simple, inventive staging devices, accessible approach to epic social themes and ensemble-based staging in this show were to prove hugely influential on *Les Misérables* a few years later.

The large subsidised theatres also proved to be an important training ground for set designers such as John Napier, who designed *Comedy of Errors* (with Dermot Hayes) and *Nicholas Nickleby* as well as a wealth of classical productions at the RSC before going on to *Cats*, *Les Misérables*, *Starlight Express*, *Miss Saigon* and *Sunset Boulevard*. Theatre critic and historian Michael Coveney has noted that Napier was part of the movement – derived partly from the work of John Bury at the RSC and from the 'humanist tradition' at the Royal Court – that uses stage design 'as a crucial but not over-emphatic element in the elucidation of hard, metallic texts by the likes of Edward Bond and Howard Brenton. The starting point is usually a bare stage, to which are added appropriate objects of some substance, stark floor-cloths and cycloramas, wooden structures'.<sup>5</sup> This approach can be seen most obviously in the relatively simple set for *Les Misérables*, with its central revolve, minimal props and use of projections to create a fluid means for moving the complicated plot forward.

Musically, too, the British musicals of the 1970s drew on a wide range of influences beyond the Golden Age Broadway musical, from old-fashioned pastiche to shows that provided a bridge between contemporary pop and rock music and the theatre. *The Rocky Horror Show* (1973) is an anarchic, quirky spoof of 1950s horror films that premiered at the Royal Court Upstairs, a space more commonly associated with experimental plays. *Tommy* was originally a series of songs by Pete Townshend of rock band The Who and was recorded by the band as a thematically linked album in 1969, receiving its British stage debut at the Derby Playhouse in 1975 and then a larger 1978 production at the Queen's Theatre, Hornchurch which transferred to the West End.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, composer Andrew Lloyd Webber and lyricist Tim Rice

were experimenting with eclectic musical styles through their jaunty, pop-rock approaches to iconic Biblical and political figures in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita*. In contrast to Broadway convention at the time – which emphasised a holistic approach to developing stage musicals – these shows were all initially conceived as a score or concept album. *Jesus Christ Superstar* started life as a 1970 concept album and a rock concert before premiering as a stage show on Broadway (1971) and in the West End (1972). *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* had an even more unorthodox evolution, with early versions performed at a London school, Westminster Central Hall and St Paul's Cathedral before being recorded as a concept album in 1969. The stage show was presented at the 1972 Edinburgh festival, the Young Vic Theatre and the Roundhouse (a production that was televised) before receiving its West End debut in 1973, and a Broadway premiere nine years later. Similarly, *Evita* started out as a concept album (1976) before being reworked for the stage and opening in the West End (1978) and on Broadway (1979) under the direction and dramaturgical guidance of Broadway veteran Harold Prince.<sup>7</sup>

The 1970s were also the decade during which Cameron Mackintosh was honing his craft and building a reputation as a producer of plays and then increasingly of musicals, moving between the commercial and subsidised sectors and between the touring circuit and the West End. From the mid-1960s to 1980, he was learning by trial and error through projects such as *Anything Goes* (1969), *The Card* (1973), *Side by Side by Sondheim* (1976) and touring productions of *Godspell* (1972) and *My Fair Lady* (1979). However, while building up his reputation in British theatre, he was also very aware of Broadway; in the late 1970s he made several trips to see the shows and speak to Broadway producers, including Bernard Jacobs at the Shubert Organization and on one occasion the legendary producer David Merrick.<sup>8</sup> It was these early years that helped shape Mackintosh's hands-on business acumen, creative approach and understanding of audiences that would underpin his international successes of the next two decades.

At the end of the 1970s, far from being confidently poised for global success, the British musical occupied an uncertain place within the theatrical establishment. The conflicting ideas about the way forward were articulated in two very different opinion pieces by leading theatre critics at the time. In 1977 Michael Billington argued for a movement away from big musicals in a *Guardian* article titled 'Why can't the British produce a successful musical?':

We fail, I suggest, when we try to be large, expensive and pseudo-American: we sometimes succeed, on the other hand, when our musicals are modest, company-based and closer to plays than mini-operas . . . the wise and witty Ned Sherrin hit the nail bang on the head when he said that the real British talent was for writing plays with music.<sup>9</sup>

Given the enormous success of *Les Misérables* a few years later, there is a certain irony in his advice that writers should look to modern dramatists rather than musicalising the classics because 'that way bankruptcy lies.'<sup>10</sup> Conversely, John Barber speculated in the *Daily Telegraph* that perhaps the vogue for more thematically serious musicals following the Rodgers and Hammerstein model had been misguided and that the musical had been 'too long preaching, proselytising and learning to pray'. He suggested that in 'drear 1981, should not musicals provide, as those old shows did, hummable melodies and a lot of fun?'<sup>11</sup>

## Defining the Modern British Musical

It is tempting to see the West End musical hits of the 1980s and 1990s as coming out of nowhere to dominate the global musical theatre scene. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that this was the period when the experimentation of the previous decade slowly started to coalesce into a more defined British sense of confidence and ownership of the musical. This did not happen overnight – in 1988, with West End musicals enjoying global success, Christopher Tookey noted that 'our artistic establishment regards the musical as a purely American art form' and that 'musicals are looked down upon by a large sections of our Arts establishment as essentially "commercial and without much artistic merit."<sup>12</sup> However, it is indisputable that the image of the British musical as slightly quaint, quirky, have-a-go affairs underwent a transformation as West End shows moved away from what Mackintosh has described as the 'that traditional, slightly amateurish British aspect of musical theatre where brilliant classical actors let their hair down'.<sup>13</sup> Most prominently, Lloyd Webber's scores imbued the musical with a contemporary populist appeal, while Cameron Mackintosh's canny approach to producing, marketing and licensing helped raise the bar in terms of production values, audience expectations and the sense of musicals as a major cultural event rather than just a diverting night out.

Artistically, there was a wide range of musicals. These included the dance-driven, environmental production of *Cats* (1981), the gritty working-class social drama of *Blood Brothers* (1983), the whimsical conceit of roller-skating trains in *Starlight Express* (1984), the epic themes and

ensemble staging of *Les Misérables* (1985) and Stephen Fry's cheery updating of the Noel Gay musical *Me and My Girl* (1985) with its folksy, nostalgic sing-along East End songs. The shift in the 1980s was thus less towards a shared thematic or musical aesthetic than toward a heightened sense of aspiration and profile of British musicals on the national and international stage. As musicals became a bigger, more lucrative and more demanding source of employment, serious musical theatre performer training courses likewise grew.

While the 1980s saw a string of commercial successes, it is important to recognise that they were largely driven by creative teams from the worlds of subsidised theatre and opera. These artists brought with them approaches to text, staging, design vocabularies and performance style that drew as much on British traditions of epic, classical and experimental theatre as from Broadway conventions. Among the leading figures in cementing this crossover was Cameron Mackintosh, who has consistently worked with artists and producers from the subsidised sector. This includes his ground-breaking partnership with the RSC in the development of *Les Misérables* as well as co-productions and partnerships with the Royal National Theatre (where he provided enhancement money for fresh revivals of the classic American musicals *Carousel*, *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*) and regional theatres such as the West Yorkshire Playhouse (where *Martin Guerre* was reworked in 1998) and Chichester Festival Theatre (*Barnum*, 2013). In his 1994 public letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mackintosh pointed out the crucial role of the subsidised sector to the success of commercial musicals:

The major international blockbuster musicals that attract millions of people (and therefore earn many millions in revenue) have nearly all been created by directors and designers whose main professional experience has been in the state-funded theatre . . . Nearly every person I have ever worked with successfully in the musical theatre has had one thing in common with me: we learned our trade through, or because of, the subsidised theatre.<sup>14</sup>

Many critics initially greeted the crossover of 'serious' theatre directors to musical theatre with disdain. In particular, Trevor Nunn's early work on commercial musicals was widely disparaged as unseemly for one of the most prominent classical directors of his generation. In 1986 Nunn noted that 'every musical show I have directed has been attacked for its lack of intellectual content',<sup>15</sup> and he has frequently argued against the underlying cultural snobbery, stating that 'I firmly believe that the distinction between serious theatre and popular theatre is false. They are formally different expressions of the same impulse. The musical can merit just as much serious attention as the straight play and the play can be as exuberant

and life-affirming as the musical.<sup>16</sup> Sam Mendes has similarly dismissed the false divide between plays and musicals, arguing that 'Cabaret is up there with [Arthur Miller's] *The Crucible* or [Harold Pinter's] *The Homecoming* or any other great play of the twentieth century that deserves to be reinvented and rediscovered generation to generation: it's a great piece of theatre'.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, David Leveaux refutes the notion that staging approaches for musicals and plays are necessarily different: 'I know some people who are in musicals like to tell you that there's a special science to musicals but actually I don't agree with that. The truth is that directing [Pinter's] *Betrayal* is absolutely a function of rhythm: inner rhythm. Directing a musical: absolutely a function of rhythm.'<sup>18</sup> He notes that in addition to the tradition of textual rigour, his generation came of age with the visceral excitement of artists such as Michael Bennett, Pina Bausch and Merce Cunningham, all of which feed into their work on both plays and musicals.<sup>19</sup> By the mid-1990s the notion of serious theatre directors tackling musicals had become more accepted, and the list of leading British directors who had since moved unapologetically between classical drama, new plays, opera, musicals and film includes Matthew Warchus (*Our House*, *Follies*, *Matilda*, *Ghost*, *Lord of Rings*), David Leveaux (*Nine*, *Fiddler on the Roof*), Sam Mendes (*Cabaret*, *Company*, *Oliver!*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*), Stephen Daldry (*Billy Elliot*), Phyllida Lloyd (*Mamma Mia!*) and Rupert Goold (*American Psycho*, *Made in Dagenham*).

## Refreshing Revivals

One intriguing outcome of these 'crossover' directors and designers has been a body of innovative re-examinations of classic American musicals since the 1990s that have helped change popular perceptions of those shows.<sup>20</sup> As Ellen Marie Peck points out, reviving classic Broadway musicals in the US carries with it 'the implications and complications' of reviving the historical moment in which it was created as well as 'the weight of the mythology each musical has acquired through its own production history. When American musicals are produced in London, they leave behind that cultural burden, and allow audiences to view them through a different lens.'<sup>21</sup> One key difference is that, in approaching Broadway shows, British directors often take their starting point from the libretto and score rather than the performance traditions that have grown up around the shows, and in doing so they have found new resonances for modern audiences.

In the 1990s the 250-seat Donmar Warehouse, under the artistic directorship of Sam Mendes, produced a series of innovative re-examinations of classic American musicals including *Cabaret* (1993), *Company* (1995), *Nine* (1996) and *Into the Woods* (1998). Staged in a space a fraction of the size of West End or Broadway theatres, and in a thrust formation that ensured an intimate relationship between audience and actors, these productions went back to the libretto to find new dramaturgical points of entry matched with staging and design approaches that were in keeping with the Donmar space, ethos and audiences. Thus Mendes's production of *Cabaret* became an immersive experience with the auditorium transformed into a nightclub, and with implicit references to 1990s heroin chic in the drug-laden Kit Kat Girls, while David Leveaux's *Nine* offered an intimate, poetic and psychologically nuanced reading of the show that was a far cry from the extravagant flamboyance of Tommy Tune's original production. Both productions later transferred to Broadway with slightly amended staging.

At the National Theatre, Declan Donnellan's 1993 production of *Sweeney Todd* in the Cottesloe studio space offered an intense, intimate alternative to the enormity of the original production and placed the focus more acutely on the psychology of the characters. Similarly, Nicholas Hytner's *Carousel* (1992) and Trevor Nunn's *Oklahoma!* (1998) and *South Pacific* (2001) offered startling re-interpretations of Rodgers and Hammerstein shows that had become somewhat clichéd. Visually, the traditional literal, bucolic sets were replaced by sparse or symbolic designs. In *Carousel* cycloramas and a relatively bare stage evoked the windswept Maine coastline, with designer Bob Crowley noting that 'a lot of the time you do get the figure of the actor against a lot of space. That's what I felt about the coast of Maine – there's the whole huge Atlantic in front of you and the whole of America behind you'.<sup>22</sup> Six years later, Anthony Ward's set for *Oklahoma!* used open space and cyclorama to emphasise the challenges of life in the arid dustbowl, while John Napier used film footage of World War II to highlight the socio-historical setting of *South Pacific*.

Several other smaller British venues have also offered fresh perspectives on the American canon. Some of the most radical examples are John Doyle's actor-musician productions where the music is played onstage by cast members, starting with *Sweeney Todd* which premiered at the 215-seat Watermill Theatre (2004) before transferring to the West End (2004) and Broadway (2005). In London, the 180-seat Menier Chocolate Factory opened in 2004 and quickly forged a reputation for exciting small-scale productions of American shows. Its innovative 2007 production of *Sunday in the Park with George*, using projections to recreate the Seurat



paintings, transferred to the West End and Broadway. This was followed by numerous bijou productions of Broadway shows including *La Cage aux Folles* (2009), *A Little Night Music* (2009), *Sweet Charity* (2010), *Pippin* (2012), *Merrily We Roll Along* (2013) and *The Color Purple* (2013). In 2004 came the opening of the Trafalgar Studios in central London with a 380-seat main theatre which has presented *Sweeney Todd* (2004) and the European premiere of *Dessa Rose* (2014).

These unconventional approaches to staging have also affected the performance style of the actors and thus the audience experience. While it is impossible to generalise absolutely, it seems fair to say that there has been a tendency within many high-profile British productions to prioritise dramatic truth and service to the story-telling above the star actors' special relationship to the audience. Director Matthew Warchus, who has worked in both Britain and New York, notes the following:

What Broadway does fantastically well is this thing of energy and 'presentation' – selling a number – which in Europe people don't do so easily. If you've got a show that requires that then it can be tricky in Europe, whereas it is second nature for Broadway performers . . . I enjoy spectacle and showmanship a great deal but also I expect my work on plays probably means that I try to find a way of making the relationships between characters really count.<sup>23</sup>

This notion was reflected in the Chichester Festival Theatre's productions of *Sweeney Todd* (2011) and *Gypsy* (2014), both of which transferred to the West End. Directed by Jonathan Kent, they starred British theatre and film actress Imelda Staunton, who brought a terrific intensity and grasp of light and shade to the roles of Mrs Lovett and Mama Rose. As critic Paul Taylor noted, 'Staunton is a great actress who happens to have a strong, marvellously expressive voice, not a musical comedy specialist.'<sup>24</sup> Her approach to the roles prioritised the dramatic truth of her character and the story-telling over a diva-like relationship with her audience. While there were moments for audience applause after songs, it was never allowed to interrupt the dramatic flow of the scenes.

## **New Works for a New Millennium**

As well as reinterpretations of Broadway classics, the new millennium has seen a tentative integration of new British musicals in theatres across the country. This includes commercial, subsidised, large-scale, mid-sized and chamber pieces and often reflects the particular aesthetics and artistic mission of the producing theatre. In 2016, new British musicals could be

found in West End houses, pub theatres and medium-scale spaces such as the Menier Chocolate Factory, the Trafalgar Studios and the St James Theatre. A handful of regional theatres are also leading the way in bringing new musicals into the fabric of British theatre through commissions and joint productions.

While a wide range of work is evident, one distinctive feature has been that the writers have often developed their craft and aesthetic in other performance areas. Some have a close awareness of the traditions of the British and American musical, such as George Stiles and Anthony Drewe (*Just So, Honk!, Mary Poppins, Betty Blue Eyes*) who have worked extensively in both the US and the UK. However, other writers have a more ambivalent relationship to the conventions of the art form. Librettist Dennis Kelly has acknowledged that even after the success of *Matilda*, 'I don't know much about musicals. To be honest with you, I'm not part of that world.'<sup>25</sup> Composer Richard Taylor (whose credits include *The Go-Between* at the West Yorkshire Playhouse) has stated that he is 'not a lover of musicals, I am afraid ... I find the bar nearly always set far too low in terms of what an audience is happy to accept ... it is from working in many plays (writing scores), and seeing many more, that I have identified what I enjoy theatrically'.<sup>26</sup> He continues:

I have a beef about the definition 'musical'. I know we can't un-invent it, but it's got such a lot of baggage. It's got to encompass everything from, I guess, what we have been trying to do with *The Go-Between* through *Mamma Mia!* and practically on to things like Cirque du Soleil. But audiences seem reluctant to come up-to-date with that development. They are seemingly happy to assume everything termed as a 'musical' is going to be somehow mass-market light entertainment (and impossible to dislike). They have never been so stubborn about the thing called 'the play'.<sup>27</sup>

This broad interpretation of what musical theatre can be continues to bring a certain freshness and unpredictability to British musical theatre. The commercial arena – traditionally the home of musical theatre – encompasses a variety of trends in the West End and on tour. In addition to ongoing imports from America (*Avenue Q, Jersey Boys, The Book of Mormon*), a variety of new types of commercial shows are being created in the UK. The huge popular success of the BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing* (2004–) has unquestionably boosted interest in dance-based shows including the nostalgic jukebox musicals *Dreamcoats and Petticoats* (2009) and *Top Hat* (2011), the latter based on the 1935 film and starring the 2008 winner of *Strictly Come Dancing* Tom Chambers, previously best known as a TV actor.

The spirit of musical and thematic experimentation is likewise reflected in shows such as *Bombay Dreams* (2002), which incorporates Bollywood music, dancing and dramaturgy.

Adaptations of classic British children's literature have formed the basis of many national touring productions targeted at young audiences as well as internationally successful family shows such as *Mary Poppins* (2004), *Matilda* (2010) and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2013) which feature serious themes as well as upbeat show tunes and visceral excitement. It is indicative that the creative team behind *Mary Poppins* based its adaptation primarily on the P. L. Travers books rather than the more upbeat, sentimental Disney film. In its turn, *Matilda* displays an anarchic and often black sense of humour, repudiating a sentimentalisation of childhood while highlighting the importance of retaining key 'childlike' qualities such as imagination, sense of justice and individuality – a theme movingly brought to life through the sense of physical release when the adult actors take over the on-stage swings and in the final moment when Matilda and Miss Honey perform a joyous and defiant cartwheel together.

Another noticeable trend has seen adaptations of socially themed British films brought to the musical stage. *Billy Elliot* (2005) tells the story of a young boy's perseverance against cultural and social barriers and is set against the 1984–85 coal miners' strike. It includes depictions of police in riot gear and a scathing indictment of Thatcherism with a huge effigy of Margaret Thatcher herself in the style of the



Plate 22 *Matilda the Musical* at Cambridge Theatre, London, 2011. Photo by Manuel Harlan © RSC

then-popular *Spitting Image* satirical television series. *Made in Dagenham* (2014) is based on the true story of how the tenacity of a group of female workers in a Dagenham car factory led to the establishment of the 1970 Equal Pay Act. And *Bend It Like Beckham* (2015) is bitter-sweet depiction of a teenage heroine torn between her passion for playing football and the cultural demands of her British Asian community, with the culture clash dramatised through a score and choreography that draws on both Western and Asian traditions.

Key to the story is the generation gap between Jess, a teenager with a sense of personal ambition, and her Sikh father. In 'People Like Us', he relates his own thwarted dreams at the hands of racial prejudice. While acknowledging progress ('In this England, in these times / Many acts which once were common / Now are crimes'), he warns that there are still racial barriers in place and that in reality 'People like us are only free to do / What they allow us to'.<sup>28</sup>

British subsidised and regional theatres play an increasingly important role in shaping the new British musical by developing original works as part of their artistic programming, echoing the growth of the non-profit musical in America. In the 1990s the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds positioned itself as a local and regional cultural hub and cultivated shows to reflect this. This led to musicals such as *Spend Spend Spend* (1998), the story of a Yorkshire housewife who won a fortune on the lottery and lost it, which featured dialogue and lyrics in Yorkshire dialect. In 2010 their musical adaptation of *The Secret Garden* was much more regionally specific than the 1991 Broadway version, again with local dialect and self-deprecating Yorkshire humour. The librettist Gary Lyons has noted his culturally specific choices:

I was conscious right through that I was a Yorkshire-based playwright writing a show for a regional English audience, inflecting a universal story with unique cultural qualities, not least through the injection of humour and warmth . . . *The Secret Garden* could be 'reclaimed' from the nostalgia bin and treated as a kind of 'upstairs-downstairs' folk story told by 'people like us' about 'people like them'. The direct choric address in northern accents, both sung and spoken, was all about familiarity between actors and audience.<sup>29</sup>

In 1999 the Theatre Royal Stratford East established an in-house musical theatre development programme that pairs up musicians from non-musical theatre backgrounds with librettists and lyricists to create shows that reflect the diverse cultural heritage of the local community, leading to shows such as *The Big Life* (2004), a ska musical about West Indian immigrants in the UK in the 1950s; *The Harder They Come* (2013),

a reggae musical set in Jamaica; and *The Infidel* (2014) a comedy based on the film of the same name in which a Muslim East End man discovers he has Jewish roots.

Other significant new musicals to emerge from the subsidised sector include *Jerry Springer: The Musical*, which was first developed and performed in a series of stagings between 2000 and 2002 as a small-scale music theatre piece at the Battersea Arts Centre, a venue best known for avant-garde work. This was followed by a successful run at the 2002 Edinburgh Festival. The National Theatre gave it a full-scale production in 2003 that transferred commercially to the West End later that year. In 2011 the National Theatre itself developed the groundbreaking *London Road*, a musical that combines verbatim theatre with music to tell the conflicted stories of the local community directly affected by the 2006–8 serial murders of prostitutes and subsequent trial of the killer. Two years later the National brought together singer-songwriter Tori Amos, playwright Samuel Adamson and director Marianne Elliott to create a highly visceral musical theatre experience in *The Light Princess*. In 2014, one of the most talked about shows was a musical adaptation of *American Psycho* at the 325-seat Almeida Theatre in London's Islington, best known for its productions of new plays and re-examinations of classical drama.

## Creating a National Infrastructure

Despite many encouraging developments, it became clear in the early 2000s that Britain lacked a solid infrastructure to nurture the next generation of writers and producers. The writers' organisation Mercury Musical Developments had offered developmental workshops and opportunities since the early 1990s but did not have the necessary funding to create a national support network. In 2005 Musical Theatre Network (MTN, originally named Musical Theatre Matters) was established as a networking organisation for musical theatre creators other than writers and actors. Spearheaded by Chris Grady – at the time Cameron Mackintosh's head of licensing – the first meeting was held in October 2005 in a room above a pub in central London. Within a year MTN had started to build a national community of musical theatre practitioners, established a presence at the Edinburgh Festival and held the first festival of new musicals in London in September 2006.

Ironically, the real breakthrough in creating an infrastructure came with the demise of one of the few producers of new musical work. When the Bridewell Theatre in the City of London was forced to close

for financial reasons, it triggered a government debate on the lack of public funding for the development of new British musical theatre led by Member of Parliament (MP, and Bridewell board member) Gerald Kaufman. In October 2003 a panel of MPs on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee listened to depositions from leading figures in the musical theatre world as well as representatives from the Arts Council of England (ACE). The hearing highlighted the enormous discrepancy in funding for musical theatre in relation to other areas of the arts and in the following years, ACE recognised the need to invest in the development of new musical theatre through institutional funding and support for individual projects through the Grants for the Arts programme. It also started to work closely with existing musical theatre organisations. In 2010 ACE commissioned a report from Mercury Musical Developments into the training needs of musical theatre writers in Britain. In 2012 the Arts Council awarded a substantial three-year grant jointly to Mercury Musical Developments, Musical Theatre Network and producing organisation Perfect Pitch to develop a national infrastructure for training musical theatre writers and developing new musicals. Tangible results from this initiative include placements of composers in theatres and developmental support in the form of dramaturgical advice, workshops with actors, staged readings and pairing shows with producers.

In addition to numerous high-quality performer-training programmes (both traditional and actor-musician courses), there is now a growing focus on nurturing musical theatre writers. This includes ongoing programmes at Mercury Musical Developments; a one-year MA in Musical Theatre at Goldsmiths College, with pathways for writers and producers; and the MA in Writing Musicals at Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts, the latter based on the Graduate Musical Theatre Writing Program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Other organisations include Book, Music, Lyrics, based largely on the model of the BMI Workshop in New York; the Copenhagen Interpretation, which runs developmental workshops, seminars and networking opportunities; and the Cameron Mackintosh Resident Composer Scheme run by Mercury Musical Developments and Musical Theatre Network with funding from the Cameron Mackintosh Foundation and the Arts Council of England. This final scheme pairs emerging composers with prestigious producing venues such as London's Soho Theatre, Bristol Old Vic, the Watermill in Newbury, Mercury Theatre in Colchester and the New Wolsey Theatre in Ipswich. Participants have opportunities to underscore plays, set texts to music or create their own new works.

While barriers of cost and cultural prejudice persist, the British musical has come a very long way since the 1970s. Certainly, recent developments seem to justify the sentiments voiced by Mercury Musical Developments in its 2010 Arts Council report:

In the last ten years, there is a refusal to accept that 'the Americans do it best', and there is within our reach a musical theatre (or rather a diverse range of musical theatres) that combines popular appeal, speaks with a British voice and has the courage to tackle subjects of relevance to contemporary culture; one that engages the emotions and the intellect for both broad and targeted audiences.<sup>30</sup>

It is perhaps this move towards a sense of cultural ownership of the musical that remains the most potent legacy of the post-1970s era, highlighting the need for shows to be experienced and understood in the context of the wider British cultural and theatrical landscape.

## Notes

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2. Sheridan Morley, 'Comedies or Errors', *Punch*, 6 October 1976.
3. Irving Wardle, 'Comedy on a Winning Streak', *Telegraph*, 30 September 1976.
4. Everitt, 'The Comedy of Errors'.
5. Michael Coveney, 'Greek Fire and Furies', *Observer Magazine*, 3 February 1980, p. 30.
6. Kurt Gänzl, *The British Musical Theatre: Vol II: 1915–1984* (Basingstoke, 1986), pp. 1047–1048.
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8. Nick Allott, interview with the author, 11 June 2013.
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14. Cameron Mackintosh, 'Letter to the Treasury', *Evening Standard*, 20 October 1994.
15. 'A Popular Front Steals the Show', *Guardian*, 4 October 1986.
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17. Matt Wolf, *Stepping into Freedom: Sam Mendes at the Donmar* (London, 2002), p. 38.
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20. For further discussion of the innovative British approach to revivals, *ibid.* chaps. 7 and 8 and interviews in the appendix.
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28. Charles Hart, 'People Like Us', *Bend It Like Beckham: The Musical* (2015).
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