

The Modern Musical:

Recent trends and the narrowing gap between Broadway and the West End

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As I leave London's Palace Theatre after a matinee production of *Spamalot*, I can't help but notice the varied reactions of the musical's patrons. There are middle-aged couples happily humming "Always look on the bright side of life," as well as 20-somethings galloping across the street while clicking their recently purchased coconuts. Still, there are a few audience members who leave the theatre shaking their heads, as if to say, "Is this what musical theatre has come to?" Many critics lament the passing of the so-called Golden Age of musical theatre of the 1950s and 60s, and some wonder if shows like *Spamalot* are a death knell for the musical as an art form. Regardless of whether you believe that musicals have taken a turn for the worse or are simply keeping up with the times, it is undeniable that their evolution over the past 30 years has reflected changes in Western culture. In the 1980s, megamusicals such as Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera* and *Starlight Express* dominated both New York's Broadway and London's West End. The 1990s saw musicals become increasingly corporate, with hits such as Disney's *The Lion King*. In the 2000s, musical theatre has banked on the familiar, with "jukebox musicals" created around popular songs, musicals adapted from films, and revivals of old musicals. Today's musicals are designed to appeal to the widest possible audience, and as a result, there is very little difference between London's West End and New York's Broadway. The high degree of overlap between the musicals of England and the U.S. can be viewed as a metaphor for the narrowing gap between our two cultures.

While the Golden Age of musicals originated in America, the British took over musical theatre in the 1980s with the development of the megamusical. Paul Prece and William A. Everett define megamusicals as productions that emphasize set design, choreography, and special effects at least as much as the music, if not more so (Wollmann 121). Megamusicals tend to have sentimental and

romantic themes and are “designed to evoke strong emotional reactions from the audiences” (Wollmann 121). The megamusical was born when *Cats* opened on London’s West End in 1981. Despite the minimal plotline, this big-budget musical was an instant success, and was imported by Broadway the following year. *Cats* enjoyed a twenty-one-year run in the West End and an eighteen year run on Broadway, holding the record for the longest-running musical in both countries until 2006. What was it about *Cats* that won the hearts of the 35 million people who saw it? Probably the fact that it was simply a good evening’s entertainment, with dazzling visuals and high energy from the performers.

After the unprecedented success of *Cats*, Andrew Lloyd Webber and producer Cameron Mackintosh went on to produce a number of megamusicals such as *The Phantom of the Opera*, which has now surpassed *Cats* as the longest running musical on Broadway. When asked about what made *Phantom* so successful, Lloyd Webber attributed it to the “classic love story” (Grella). *Phantom* strikes an emotional chord with the audience because it is about unrequited love, to which many people can relate. While it is true that *Phantom* has a more complex plotline than *Cats* and the love story causes people to get emotionally involved, it is clear that most of its success can be attributed to its sleek production design and professionalism of performance. The 1986 reviews of opening night on the West End are filled with claims such as, “The set designs were the best part of show,” complete with trap doors, flares, flying corpses, and a falling chandelier (O’Connor). Critic Michael Radcliffe described the production as “a gorgeous trick,” and “beyond question the most beautiful spectacle on the West End stage.” Opening night received a 10-minute standing, stamping ovation, and Cameron Mackintosh predicted the musical’s success by prophesying, “The show is going all over the world. We knew that anyway but now we are confident about it” (Owen). With this statement, Mackintosh revealed that megamusicals do not become international sensations by accident, but they are conceived with internationalism in mind; they are designed to appeal to the broadest audience possible.

Although *Phantom* and *Cats* were revered for their set design, spectacle alone is not always a recipe for success. *Starlight Express* opened on the West End in 1984 and in New York in 1987 with the largest budget in Broadway history (Spencer). *Starlight Express*, which was already an over-the-top spectacle on the West End, used its \$8 million budget to make the Broadway version even more elaborate. In the words of theatre critic Frank Lipsius, the changes made to *Starlight Express* “look like the difference between a home movie and a Hollywood extravaganza.” In the West End version, the characters, which are trains, used roller skates to glide around the theatre, but the American version included a three-level track “complete with 3-d models of cities, towns, and rural settings.” The plexiglass track was a complex system of ramps and bridges that relied on computers to raise and lower the moving parts, often connecting the roadways in the nick of time during the train races. The high-tech scenery was so much trouble that the opening of *Starlight Express* was postponed twice due to technical difficulties (Ellsworth-Jones). Because of the dangers involved, the 36 actors performing on rollerskates received a “risk payment” of \$15 each performance.

The modifications made to *Starlight Express* could reflect “the difference between British and American theatrical tastes,” as theatre critic W.J. Weatherby suggests. After all, “everything is bigger on Broadway.” But even in America, bigger isn’t always better. Despite horrible reviews, *Starlight Express* was still running in 2001 and second only to *Cats* as Britain’s longest running musical (Spencer). On Broadway, however, *Starlight Express* closed before the ticket sales recouped the soaring production costs (Wollmann 140).

It’s hard to know why *Starlight Express* flopped on Broadway but ran so long on the West End. Interestingly, the British musical was inspired by the American railroad. Lloyd Webber explained, “Trains are much more romantic than planes. And, of course, I mean American trains...all of American music is about trains and it’s tougher and more romantic – all the way from Duke Ellington to that Chattanooga-

Atchison-Topeka-and-the-Santa-Fe strain...English trains only whistle, but American trains have four notes. It's the magic of the noise of American trains and the blues in the night that gets me (the most)."

Part of the success of *Starlight Express* on the West End could therefore be due to British nostalgia for a romanticized American railroad, which perhaps Americans themselves feel little connection to.

According to some reviews, the politically correct New Yorkers also took offense to the fact that "the engines were all male and their tenders female, dimpling, wiggling, and inclined to sing pretty songs about wanting to be whistled at" (Nightingale). Or maybe the high-tech production was simply too over-the-top. Megamusicals have often been criticized for undermining the power of language by replacing it with visuals, and *Starlight* did this to the extreme. Surprisingly, theatre critic Weatherby thought that the acting was more memorable than the special effects, for example when Robert Torti "does an amusing macho act" as the diesel champion. But in this production, skating ability completely overshadowed the singing or acting abilities of the entire cast. In the end, New York Times described the production as, "Two numbing hours...a confusing jamboree of piercing noise, routine roller-skating and Orwellian special effects" (Owen).

The trend towards emphasizing spectacle is likely an attempt by the musical theatre industry to compete with film and television. Western audiences have grown accustomed to a high degree of visual stimulation from the media, and this level of visual input is now being recreated in a live performance setting. As modern-day blockbuster films are often criticized for having superfluous special effects in place of content, it shouldn't be a surprise that the same thing is happening in the world of musical theatre. Audiences like to be entertained by the wonders of modern technology.

Some argue, however, that an important aspect of theatre is lost when technology is used in place of imagination. Ian Nethersell, a director of small-scale musicals in the London area, believes that expensive visuals such as the helicopter in *Miss Saigon* are completely unnecessary. "The human mind

makes connections instinctively” he explains. Sound effects could have easily given the suggestion of a helicopter, without needing to physically put a helicopter on stage. If you allow the audience to do a lot of the imaginative work themselves, they will invest more in the production. “If the audience is given just enough,” he says, “they will take more from it.” Mark Grant agrees:

“The exaltation of the director, of movement for the sake of movement, of technological scenic design, has brought the outer trappings of the cinema to the musical theater without the cinema’s inner psychological eye. Literal illustration in the Broadway musical has taken over the power of suggestion and imagination, which is the essence of the art of the theater” (303).

Yet directors like Nethersell do not find themselves on Broadway or the West End. “By the 1980s it was considered okay for the scenery to steal the show if the show was a box-office success (*Cats*, *Starlight Express*). By the late 1990s it was not only okay, it was considered aesthetically upscale for the production design to take over (*The Lion King*)” (Grant 289). While the 1980s musical sensations were largely British imports, the corporate musical of the 1990s emerged in New York City in direct correlation with the renovation of Times Square. Since the late ‘80s, plans were in place to rid Times Square of its strip clubs and porn shops and make it more tourist-friendly (Wollman 142). In 1994, New York City made a deal with Disney in which the corporation would expand its influence in Times Square and renovate the New Amsterdam theatre in exchange for a 49-year lease on the building. Soon after, other entertainment corporations followed suit by investing in real estate and theatres in Times Square. The result was what some call the “Disneyfication” of entertainment in New York. The city has “traded local flavor” to become a “global crossroads, populated by transnational corporations catering to tourists” (Wollman 144). Musical theatre has made a parallel transformation. Instead of appealing to local audiences, musicals today are designed “to appeal to the broadest possible audience, thereby

making the largest amounts of money” (Wollman 213). Just as Times Square has become more tourist-friendly, so has the musical.

The great musicals of the past never set long-running records like the musicals of today. In those times, a production would have its run and once the local audience had seen the show, it would end. Today, musicals have the possibility of running forever because of an “ever-renewing domestic and foreign audience” (Wollman 146). New waves of tourists constantly cycle in and out of both New York City and London, so fresh faces are always available. Since musical directors today have to appeal to such a diverse group of people, they aim for the middle range. In the words of director Nethersell, “you know you’re going to get an easy ride.” Because a wide audience is the goal, musicals make an effort not to offend or alienate anyone. But as a result, they “don’t challenge the audience at all. It’s just a good night out.” Nethersell also finds the musicals of Lloyd Webber and Disney “lecturing and a little moralistic.” They attempt to teach you a lesson as opposed to making you question your own moral viewpoint. In Nethersell’s opinion, theatre productions are much more intriguing if they throw the question back to the audience: “What would you do?” The current trend toward emphasis on visuals over language also ensures that musicals will appeal to every tourist. As New York Times critic Frank Rich put it, “*Cats* proved as no production had before that there was an infinite tourist audience for a theatrical attraction in which spectacle trumped content and no English was required for comprehension, whether by young children or foreign visitors” (Wollmann 123).

One effect of the corporate owned musical is that they can afford to invest much more in production costs than private companies, showing up even the megamusicals of the 80s in decadence. *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King* were the most expensive Broadway musicals in history when they opened, each costing Disney about \$15 million (Wollman 144). Corporations like Disney use a number of techniques to ensure they recoup their investment. *The Lion King*, for example, made \$20

million from advance ticket sales in 1997, making a \$5 million profit before the show even opened (Wollmann 146). Large corporations can also take advantage of a business technique known as “synergy,” in which one of their products can be used to advertise for their other products. For example, Disney’s movie *The Lion King* can be used to sell Lion King merchandise, Lion King theme-park rides, and of course, *Lion King*, the musical (Wollman 145).

Just as Disney uses the familiarity of a popular title to sell theatre tickets, the musicals of the 2000s also tend to rely on the tried-and-true. Revivals of Golden Age musicals are ever-popular on both Broadway and the West End. Today, many musical revivals are even given an extra boost of publicity through television advertising, or by featuring famous actors from television series or newly discovered talent from reality shows. *The Sound of Music* and *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, two current hits on the West end, found their Maria and Joseph on reality TV shows (Lee).

Another current trend is to carve out shows from existing songs that are already popular. For example, the West End gave rise to *We Will Rock You*, a musical featuring songs by Queen, and *Mamma Mia*, a story built around 27 ABBA hits. Although ABBA is not as popular in the US as in Britain, the musical has become a success on both sides of the Atlantic. Like most “jukebox” musicals, *Mamma Mia*’s producers “are banking on thousands of devotees wanting to hear their favourite Abba tunes live” (Rosenthal). However, *Mamma Mia* may be more successful than others of its kind because instead of awkwardly stringing together popular songs using a weak plot, as in *We Will Rock You*, or offering a biomusical, such as *Buddy*, the creators of *Mamma Mia* actually wove ABBA’s hits into a clever plotline. Created by three single women in their 40s, *Mamma Mia* also brought a “cheerfully feminist” feel-good musical into “the overwhelmingly male-dominated world of British commercial theatre” (Spenser).

Mamma Mia ends with a bang, as the whole cast dances and sings “Mamma Mia” and “Dancing Queen” one last time. Many rock musicals end in this fashion, giving the audience more a feeling that

they're in a rock concert than a theatre, as they mouth the lyrics along with the actors. At the end of *Buddy*, "one of the goals is to get audiences standing and dancing along" (Wolf). The rock concert feel tends to break down the fourth wall, both by emphasizing the bond between the audience and performers and by getting the audience physically involved. Even musicals that don't end with a concert atmosphere often achieve a similar effect simply because of the style of their music. Most musicals created since the 1990s have a rock groove score, which, "unlike a pre-1950 dance beat, elicits a call-and-response emotional reaction from the theatergoer similar to the call-and-response of African-American gospel music and spirituals" (Grant 160). Grant, however, does not think this is a good thing, and asserts that "the intrinsic rhythmic structure of the rock groove is partly responsible for killing off the Broadway musical as an art form" (118). He quotes Elizabeth Swado who also believes, "the very elements that make good rock make bad theatre. You should not want to get up and dance with a character who is not even supposed to know you're there" (161). But I'd like to ask, why not?

"The musical is constantly struggling to remain relevant and viable as a live performing art in an age when electronic media exert the most power and influence" (Wollman 226). The fact that theatre is "live" is what sets it apart from film, so perhaps it needs to be emphasized. Audiences like to be reminded of the fact that the performers before them are not separated a screen, but are actually real people who they can interact with. Theatre historian Sarah Woodcock has noticed that today's musical theatre audiences tend to cheer most for the dancing. She believes this is because it has to be real. Dance is one of the few things left on the stage which is not enhanced by technology.

"With the rock groove, gone is the onstage expositional "I" of the foxtrot beat. The rock groove tells the audience the "I" is them, not the character onstage" (Grant 161). Although Grant believes this is the downfall of modern musical theatre, perhaps it is precisely what today's audience craves. People want to be the center of attention and they want to feel involved. For most western audiences, the

fourth wall is firmly in place every day in the form of a television screen. During a live performance, they want to feel a connection to their fellow humans on the stage. Having the performers acknowledge and celebrate the audience gives them a sense of empowerment.

Television and movies have become such an influential part of western culture that a huge number of current musicals are adaptations of popular films. Since producing a musical these days is so costly and time-consuming, it is simply safer to use familiar titles, characters, and plotlines that audiences already know and love. For example, the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, which grossed \$2.916 billion, was recently made into a musical that opened on the West End. In keeping with the current trends, this \$25 million musical is pure eye-candy, complete with a rotating stage that has separate moving segments that can change levels and create an infinite supply of landscapes throughout the characters' journey. Obviously, the hope is that the musical will attract enough *Lord of the Rings* fans to make a profit on this expensive endeavor. In the words of producer Marty Bell, "Everybody's trying to find a way to be safe in a business you can't be safe in" (Wollman 146). In fact, statistics from the past decade show that "Broadway seasons offering the fewest new productions often make the most money" (152).

If you compare the musicals that are currently running on Broadway to those on the West End, you'll find an amazingly high percentage of overlap. This correlation can be attributed to the high degree of overlap between British and American cultures. Interestingly, the West End produced the musical *Saturday Night Fever*, which was based on an American film, while Broadway produced *Spamalot*, which is based on a British film. The fact that the British were the first to seize on icons like Buddy Holly and films like *Saturday Night Fever* as inspiration for musicals could be due to "the foreign appeal of American nostalgia in Britain" (Wolf). Likewise, the success of *Spamalot* reveals an American appreciation of British comedy.

When *Spamalot* was transferred to London's West End in 2006, very few changes were made to the script to adapt it for British audiences. In fact, references to the Laker girls, the Tony Awards, Britney Spears, and Michael Moore were left in the script, suggesting that the British are well-versed enough in American pop culture to get the jokes. According to my classmates who have seen both the Broadway and West End version of the musical, the British actors played the comedy more dead-pan, while the American actors were more expressive and vulgar. These differences reveal that cultural distinctions still exist between British and the U.S., but our differences are not so great that the same musical can't be a hit on both sides of the Atlantic.

Spamalot is an especially interesting case study because it both spoofs the modern musical and at the same time, epitomizes its essence. For example, in Act II, King Arthur enters a "dark and very expensive forest," which pokes fun at the ridiculous amounts of money spent on sets these days. The irony is that the "expensive forest" looks like 2-D cut-outs of trees, but it is still clear that *Spamalot* has enough costume changes and glitz to rack up high production costs. *Spamalot* also features the song, "This is the song that goes like this." It sounds like the quintessential romantic love song, but the lyrics don't actually say anything. This is clearly a jab at the tendency for musicals today to all sound the same, specifically Lloyd Webber's "power ballads" (Nightingale). In the words of Sarah Woodcock, "It is as if you could take a song out of one musical and put it into another without losing any meaning." The song "Find Your Grail" is a great example of the type of "lecturing and moralistic" message found in many of today's musicals that so annoys Ian Nethersell. The title of the song itself is a command, urging the audience to identify a goal they should strive for.

All of these jokes on Broadway theatre also serve the purpose of expanding audience demographics. *Spamalot*'s creator, Eric Idle explained, "I knew Python people would come anyway, but I wanted to make sure that if they didn't know Python, they'd still have a good evening" (Appleyard).

Apparently his tactics were effective because classmates on the London trip confessed that even though they didn't enjoy Monty Python humor, they enjoyed the show because they appreciated the theatre jokes.

To increase publicity for the show, the producers have decided to cast the new "Lady of the Lake" using the Swedish reality TV series called *West End Star*. (The previous Lady of the Lake is leaving to play the same role on Broadway.) Currently, there are ten finalists and the winner will take over the role in early February (Lee). Even on the way out of the theatre, you can't miss the "Ye Olde Rippey-Offey Shoppe." This musical doesn't even pretend to hide the fact that they're selling over-priced Python-related merchandise to make a buck, yet people willingly buy it. Idle himself admits that the musical is "a money-spinner for us. It will continue to be, because there is a touring version as well. It is a big opportunity" (Malvern). *Spamalot* is a perfect example of the commercialization of the musical. It's just another way to make money on jokes people already think are funny. Even Terry Jones, who co-directed the original film, could see that *Spamalot* was "utterly pointless and full of hot air" (Malvern).

Spamalot also made use of musicals' current tendency to intentionally tear down the fourth wall. By making references to the fact that King Arthurs' knights were assigned to put on a musical in the West End, the audience was continually reminded that they were in fact in the West End, rather than medieval Camelot. At the end of the show, the grail was found under the chair of an audience member and she was dragged onto the stage for photographs, creating a direct interaction between performers and audience. And finally, there was one notable script change when *Spamalot* was adapted for the London stage. Every instance of the word "Broadway" was simply swapped for "West End." The subtle message behind this swap is that the two places are virtually interchangeable.

Even beyond Broadway and the West End, musical theatre has become a global business due to theatre franchising. Now the "official" Broadway or West End show can be precisely replicated all over

the world when it goes on tour. This has led critics like Grant to use terms such as the “McMusical” to describe today’s “corporately franchised staged happenings that are actually music videos packaged for theatre” (309). The fact that the same musical can appeal to so many different cultures is a testimony to the gradual blurring of distinctions between cultures that comes with increased travel, commerce, and communication.

On one hand, the modern musical has broadened the theatre-going audience and made musical theatre more accessible to the masses, but on the other, it has stifled creativity. Big-budget musicals tend to out-compete more modest musicals, because with elevated ticket prices, audiences want the most “bang for their buck.” As Sarah Woodcock explains, “Today’s musicals are so expensive, you can’t afford to not enjoy yourself.” As a result, independent producers cannot compete with corporations. There’s not much of a place for small-scale or experimental musicals anymore—even Off-Broadway, which has now developed somewhat of a partnership with Broadway (Wollman 154).

But for all the criticism modern musicals have endured, let’s not forget that that the chief purpose of the musical is entertainment, and many of today’s hits on Broadway and the West End have achieved that goal with flying colors. Catherine Campbell, an actress in the musical *Footloose*, will be the first to admit that she misses brilliant theatre that shakes her to the core. But she also realizes, “I’m not everybody...I see the joy that people stand up with at the end of the play, and I think, ‘What a wonderful thing to give people.’ I’ve never felt warmth from an audience like I do in this show” (Wollmann 148). So even though the critics hated *Footloose*, the audiences loved it. And in the words of Ian Nethersell, “Without audience, theatre is nothing. It’s just up its own ass.” After the September 11th attacks in 2001, there was talk of cancelling the opening of *Mamma Mia* on Broadway. “But we started previewing at the beginning of October,” explains Judy Cramer, “and there was this great feeling

in the theatre. It was like a tiny contribution we could make to taking people's minds off the horror of it all" (Spencer).

Regardless of what the reviewers say, today's musicals hold appeal for many. People still flock to the theatres to find an escape from their daily troubles with a sumptuous set design, bright costumes, a catchy score, and of course, singing and dancing. Even in competition with electronic media, people are drawn to the theatre because the high energy of a live performance is something that can't quite carry through a screen. As the international success of so many modern musicals has demonstrated, this type of entertainment appeals not only to American and British audiences, but to the world.

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