

A Note on Musicals

If there is a norm for theatre in the last decade of the previous century – and indeed still today – it is the mega-musical. A sign of the times is that currently 20 (out of 41 West End theatres are occupied with musicals, no less than four of these being long-running hits by Andrew Lloyd-Webber; and the vogue is world-wide. Phantom of the Opera, Miss Saigon and Les Miserables are playing from Sydney to Toronto in productions that exactly reproduce each other: indeed in Toronto out of the eight major theatres, six are filled by musicals. Between them, these musicals draw more spectators than all other drama performed on English-speaking stages. Remarkably, although all qualify as new works in the imaginative innovation of their staging -- the dynamics of choreography, design and visual effects being their core -- most are adaptations or up-datings of old material. Some (like The Blues Brothers or Crazy for You) take well-known music or songs and create a new story around these. Others (like Return to the Forbidden Planet or the Chater-Robinson Peter Pan) borrow pre-existing plots for newly-written scores. But this is far more than mere nostalgia, even in Sunset Boulevard, which restages a classic film that itself looked back to more golden Hollywood days of the vanished past. Behind the retrospective gaze is an affirmation of stability and continuity. Although on the surface the spectacle might seem to parallel the glittering escapism of the song-and-dance shows during the Great Depression, the tone is very different. Where the theatrical extravaganzas of the 1930s offered dream-perfection and the exclusive glamour of high-society top-hats and ball-gowns, contemporary mega-musicals tend to focus on ordinary people, even the poor and destitute or the victims of war. Of course, the form imposes almost obligatory happy endings, which panders to romantic wish-fulfillment. Yet with their characteristic driving rhythms, choreographic dynamism and sheer visual panache, as well as in their sheer scale, these musicals are not lamenting bygone eras, or yearning for the restoration of lost innocence, but celebrating life and the values of popular culture. In particular, it is hardly coincidental that the three longest-running and most widely - seen should be based respectively on one of the great nineteenth-century social novels dealing with the sweep of historical change that produced modern democracy (Les Miserables), a nineteenth-century melodrama of beauty-and-the-beast redemption (Phantom of the Opera), and an Italian opera depicting the supreme value of the individual in the clash of different cultures (with Puccini's Japan updated to Vietnam in Miss Saigon). The world presented is one of grand themes and moral certainties, in which the progress embodied by the nineteenth century is still relevant. In addition, the

virtuoso display of stage mechanics and modern technology that forms the visual climax in such works is an assertion of robust materialism.

It could be claimed that the limitations of the musical form preclude any serious treatment of significant subjects, but that is only perhaps problematic from a narrow elitist viewpoint. Rather, it should be recognized that in addition to the large casts that expand work for the acting profession and advances in stage-design fostered by the finances of long runs, the mega-musical has attracted audiences that would not normally go to stage-plays and given the theatre a popular base, which keeps it alive in a time when television ratings have dropped by up to 30% -- indeed the theatre, for the first time in decades may even be drawing spectators away from television. Symbolizing this, in Toronto Miss Saigon has even paid for the building of a completely new theatre that houses the production.