

Two households, both alike in dignity: Bridging subsidy and commerce(ial sectors) – musical theatre as a case study.

At the opening of the 'Zeur Niet' exhibition at the Allard Pierson Museum I talked about my role here in the Netherlands as one focused on building bridges. Here, today, I will say a little more about the kinds of bridges we might build, but already we can celebrate; the simple act of including this talk about musical theatre at the Nederlands Theater Festival is evidence of bridges already being built by the organisers who invited me to present.

When discussing the content for this talk I invoked the opening sentence from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* - 'Two households, both alike in dignity, in fair Verona [Amsterdam], where we lay our scene', because it seemed to me to be a work that challenges separations, feuds and barriers. It is a work that still resonates, performed in many languages and adaptations, and notably as the musical *West Side Story*. As content, the story speaks to us about the need for acceptance and integration; features that also apply to creative processes and economic structures. It is a work from almost 75 years ago that encourages bridge-building. So, I'm going to begin by talking a little about collaboration and innovation in *West Side Story* – before introducing some other, more recent, production models. I will focus on development processes elsewhere - the US and UK - as a provocation that I hope will generate innovative ideas among producers, funders and creators in the Netherlands.

We can all agree that Shakespeare wrote plays, and yet... I might argue that some of the comedies and especially the later plays contain plenty of music, and Shakespeare's reliance on and reference to music, songs and musicians is a feature of his work. I'm not going to be so provocative as to argue he was writing musicals, but just to make the point that there is music in many forms of theatre, and the use of music, sound and movement in theatre is not alien to anyone working in the form. What is the difference, then, between *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*? And why do we need to consider this?

Bruce O'Neil, the director of music at the Royal Shakespeare Company in the UK (and Musical Leader of *Matilda: The Musical*), spoke in an interview about the difference between plays with songs and musicals as being whether the music and the songs were a significant driver of the action. He went on to talk about the musical similarity of the Acrobat Stories in *Matilda* that provide a linking motif through the plot and reveal the story we will discover later – a prolepsis or flash forward in the accompanying music that is only likely to be heard subliminally, but is nonetheless effective.

The famous quintet at the end of Act One of *West Side Story* is a perfect example of how song adds value to other parts of the multidisciplinary text. The two feuding gangs are, in fact, singing the same music as each other: they are signified as similar. Anita's version of the tune is very similar but has a jazzier feel. Meanwhile, the real difference is the material Tony and Maria are singing: their duet 'Tonight' marks their togetherness and their separation from the gangs. Interjected questions between Riff the leader of the Jets, and Tony, require him to be at the rumble (the planned showdown) that night. So, in the musical dramaturgy of that 3-minute finale the crux of the dilemma and the forthcoming tragedy is laid out. Tony is torn between loyalty to his friends in the gang, and his love for Maria that is changing his musical language to hers. Music is not only driving the energy of the scene but is revealing characteristics that are not evident in other parts of the text. Nobody ever says that the Jets and the Sharks have, in some ways, quite similar histories and life chances but here the music reveals it. Tony and Maria fall instantly in love in a moment of music and dance, and then sing their togetherness into permanency in a duet that is reprised in this moment.

Arguably the best moment in the best musical of all time, why do we need to consider this musical analysis? Well, since musicals rely on this level of interaction between the art forms of dance, music and theatre – and I have only focused here on music - it's quite hard to get it right. It takes time,

collaboration and experimentation that can't be done by one person in front of a computer. It needs to be tried out and workshopped with people from many disciplines in a room together.

Director/choreographer Jerome Robbins (who mostly worked in modern ballet) famously credits the collaboration itself as the 'true gesture of the show'. And Bernstein scholar, Elizabeth Wells, has argued based on her extensive reading of the archival materials for *West Side Story* that (lyricist) Stephen Sondheim's reserve pulled (classical composer and conductor) Leonard Bernstein away from sentimentality, while Bernstein's emotionality prevented Sondheim from making every song a cool psychological profile. Meanwhile the young actors stopped the performance becoming an opera because they needed music they could sing while dancing, and Robbins prevented Bernstein's symphonic tendencies by dictating the lengths and moods of the dance segments. He also stopped playwright Arthur Laurents becoming too preachy, and producer Hal Prince toned down the violence. No-one could control Robbins, but having all these contributors from classical art forms moved the work away from becoming a modern ballet. The point is that many skills from across the theatre/dance/music worlds, classical and popular, were needed to produce this innovative work. Constructive interdisciplinary collaboration is one of the keys to innovation in musical theatre.

The second factor needed is time. This work began as an idea somewhere between 1945 and 1949 depending on whose account you read, but in the 1940s it was to be set on the East Side of New York and to be adapted as a story about a Jewish girl and a Gentile boy. Some work was done, but there were problems and all the team had other work. Then in 1955 work started again in earnest on the project which had now been relocated to the West Side of Manhattan with rival gangs of so-called Americans (recent migrants from Europe) and Puerto Ricans (recent migrants from the Caribbean) – a reflection of political unrest at that time in NYC. The team worked on the show for 13 months (according to Arthur Laurents) and importantly the work then had an extended rehearsal period of 8 weeks when the norm at the time was just 4. On August 10<sup>th</sup> 1957 there was a first run-through for an audience of actors and theatre professionals before the first tryouts in Washington began on August 19<sup>th</sup>, followed by a similar run in Philadelphia during which the show continued to evolve. What is clear is that it was normal practice at this time for new shows to evolve on the road (with no press reviews allowed) before arriving on Broadway – there was a widely accepted preview process of workshopping the material with audiences. The show arrived at the Winter Garden on Broadway in September 1957 for its premiere having been first worked on about a decade earlier.

This was a commercial process in a system that was able to raise sufficient funding from external investors and angels for extended rehearsals and a preview period during which writers often reworked shows quite substantially, before the formal opening on Broadway. In the intervening years many other systems have emerged for developing shows because, as I've tried to make clear, the collaboration across disciplines requires time, and workshops, readings, previews etc., and can take many years from the germination of an idea.

I'll now briefly describe the process through which *Les Misérables* was created – the results of which you may all have seen here in the 1990s and again this year. Following a staged concert performance in Paris, the work was brought to the attention of Cameron Mackintosh who enlisted Trevor Nunn. Nunn had directed the musical *Cats* (1981) and, as artistic director of one of the two leading subsidised theatres in the UK – the Royal Shakespeare Company - had argued that there should be no separation between commercial and subsidised sectors or between musicals and plays. In an interview he commented 'I've never seen any dividing line, and I don't think Shakespeare saw one' (Dickson 2011). He had adapted Charles Dickens' immense 1839 novel *Nicholas Nickleby* for an 8.5 hour stage production in Stratford in 1980, and would use a similar process to stage *Les Misérables*. Nunn, with his creative team of co-director John Caird, designer John Napier and lighting designer David Hersey, came to an agreement: The Royal Shakespeare Company would partner with Mackintosh to produce the show at the London home of the RSC at the time, which was the Barbican, before Mackintosh moved it to the Palace Theatre in the West End. Mackintosh raised £300k from his investors (angels)

to match the 'in kind' support of the RSC, with another £300k required for the transfer to the Palace Theatre. The RSC offered facilities, spaces, expertise and staff. A 10-week rehearsal period was budgeted for during which the show continued to evolve, music was rewritten, songs added, linking leitmotifs were threaded through so that the music drove the story. Crucially, the team, with their developed working relationships and their innovative staging practices created a hit that played at the Palace for 19 years before moving to the Sondheim Theatre, as well as being staged globally. Like *West Side Story*, the work was not initially praised by all the critics, but audiences loved it. And the enormous bonus was that the RSC, that had been cash-strapped at that point because of repeated cuts in its funding, received a share in the profits for many years into the future. The '*Les Mis* bonus' and more recently the '*Matilda* bonus' since that work was created by the RSC too, funded future innovations in literary theatre as well as continued investment in music for theatre and musicals. This interaction with the subsidised theatre led to a step change in how musicals were conceived, developed and staged, and in the commercialisation of the subsidised sector. It opened up the possibility for cross-disciplinary nurturing of talent and experimentation by experienced creatives.

The RSC became more commercial in all its dealings and undertook more international touring, DVD releases and so on, as did the National Theatre (RNT). Examples that are not musicals that Dutch audiences may be aware of are *War Horse* (2007 in association with Handspring Puppet Company) and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2013 in association with Frantic Assembly) that began at the National and then became West End, Broadway and international hits following the subsidised / commercial collaboration model. The thinking that generated the collaborations between subsidised and commercial sectors resulted from the acceptance that innovation requires time and collaborations not just between sectors, but between theatrical forms, and that may require more money than the state can afford.

And this is important because there is a reason why I have always chosen to study popular theatre even though I have always been pushing against the tide. Popular entertainments tend to reveal the concerns and issues, the social changes and historical contexts within which they are created – and they can reach huge audiences. The politics that are within the entertainment of popular musicals reach large swathes of the population. If we want to embrace liberal or environmental concerns, they are likely to have much greater reach to diverse audiences within popular entertainment – and even more fundamentally ideas can be communicated subtly by creating empathy and understanding, allowing another point of view to be understood and enjoyed, and by suggesting the complexity of a character or situation using the abstract arts of music and dance alongside the verbal text. With the lowering of resistance that music can ensure, musicals have a great capacity as tools for political and social good, and as a means of simultaneously promoting diverse voices and points of view, as well as for simple joyful and escapist entertainment.

Let's leap over to America now for some more models of interaction between the subsidised and commercial worlds. Apart from the out of town tryouts a new practice was first noticed in 1967 when *Hair* was mounted by Joseph Papp at the Not-for-Profit Public Theater off-Broadway in New York. Some years later, and with many other multi-disciplinary productions in between, Papp followed this with *A Chorus Line* (1975).

The most recent phenomenon to emerge from the Public Theater is, of course, *Hamilton* (2015), that was 7 years in development before arriving on Broadway to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and 11 Tony Awards. I won't say much about its development since there is so much material available to read, but there are three points I want to make:

- 1 - During its development parts of the work appeared in many other digital ways generating interest long before the show opened, and, of course, Miranda had already had a hit Broadway musical (*In The Heights* 2005 that had been developed in Connecticut and Off-Broadway) and this generated interest in his work. The key event in *Hamilton's* visibility was that the song that became the opening song on the *Hamilton Mixtape*, 'Alexander Hamilton' was performed at the White House as early as 2009 and

was all over social media from then on. The introduction of musical material to audiences prior to a musical is not new (think of *Jesus Christ Superstar*: 1971 whose concept album appeared in 1970), but through social media has become increasingly significant.

2. The music draws heavily from, and in fact takes motifs from rap music as well as soul, R'nB, pop and musical theatre. Crucially too, these references to rap music derive from Miranda's genuine love for both rap and musicals and interactions with artists in both fields, such that the cast album (produced by rap music producers) became the highest entrant to the Billboard charts of its genre since 1963 at Number 12, and it was also the first musical to reach Number 1 on the Rap album chart.

3. Miranda continued to use social media and to make all kinds of creative interventions after the show opened. As well as the Mixtape, there are *Hamilton Instrumentals*, *Hamildrops*, and famously, he and some of the cast performed to the waiting queues outside the theatre, that audiences shared and generated further interest in the show. Much of this was a genuine attempt to be inclusive of those people who couldn't afford tickets to a Broadway show.

The collaboration across musical genres and the incorporation of popular styles, as well as the extensive use of digital platforms and social media, before and after the show appeared, has changed the way audiences interact with live performance, and it's crucial that we engage with and listen to our audiences.

To return to the topic: *The Rocky Horror Show* in the UK and *Hair* in the US seem to be surprising works to have been developed in subsidised experimental theatres – but both were experimental or politically relevant works in their times and places. Not all the following are overtly politically relevant, but they represent a new model of collaboration between the sectors that has led to innovation and award success. American Repertory Theatre and La Jolla Playhouse in California developed *Big River* in 1984 that later moved to Broadway; *The Who's Tommy* followed some years later (1992). Alley Theatre in Houston, Texas, opened Wildhorn and Cuden's *Jekyll and Hyde* (1990) that, although it had a Broadway run, has always been more successful in the regional theatres. *The Light in the Piazza* was developed by composer Adam Guettel and playwright/director Craig Lucas at the Sundance Playwrights Retreat in Wyoming in 2001, before it was first presented by Seattle's Intiman Theatre at a workshop in NYC in 2003. There is another side to the story, however: David Armstrong (who ran a US regional theatre for 18 years and now hosts the Broadway Nation podcast) mentioned that this new out-of-town system was not always equitable, but that *Hairspray*, *Memphis*, and Disney's *Aladdin* had all had producing partners within the not-for-profit sector. And, of course, you all know the story of *Lazarus* (2015 directed by Ivo van Hove) that was developed at the off-Broadway New York Theatre Workshop and then the Off-West End King's Cross Theatre, before arriving here in Amsterdam, and then moving to cities around the world.

I could go on, and, of course, I'm only mentioning some of the success stories, but the point is that collaboration between subsidised/not-for-profit regional theatres and commercial producers of musicals have become established, and there are benefits for both parties. The not-for-profit theatres allow time, space, readings, workshop opportunities and try-outs that can lead to innovation in form and diversity in content. The result for them is reputational advantage from successes and awards, alongside financial returns in the form of ongoing royalties from successful performances, as well as younger more diverse audiences being attracted to their venues. The other advantage that has been noted in many of these collaborations or co-productions is the opportunity for new topics to be explored in shows that move beyond traditional dramaturgies or formats, and more diverse representation in creative teams and among writers.

Both *Snow Child* (2018) and *Soft Power* (2019) were works that, in the US, began in regional theatres and had female or minority writers and/or composers, and there are many more directors and artistic

directors in regional theatres than on Broadway who are women or people of colour who are telling new stories in new ways.

This summer I saw the winner of the 2022 Pulitzer Prize for drama *A Strange Loop* in London developed at Musical Theatre Factory, commissioned by The Playwrights Realm and premiered at Playwrights Horizons. The lead character Usher (a theatre usher) is (and I quote) 'a Black, queer writer, working a day job he hates while writing his original musical: a piece about a Black queer writer, working a day job he hates while writing his original musical....' It is a tour-de-force of reflexive entertainment, politics and philosophy that explores new dramaturgies and approaches to physical performance. It went on to win just about every Best Musical award on Broadway. Theatres have discovered that, although ticket sales overall are dwindling, those for musicals are rising, and they are rising among younger audience members and those from diverse backgrounds – particularly when the shows being performed represent their stories. This has the potential to build the audience for all forms of theatre into the future.

A similar pattern is developing in the UK, where regional theatres (that are producing houses with repertory systems) are collaborating to develop new musicals, ones that have already been through supported stages of rehearsed readings and workshops in Universities, conservatories and fringe venues. A network has developed under the auspices of Musical Theatre Network (MTN) and Mercury Musical Developments (MMD). These two funded organisations support the development of new musicals with sponsored (financial) awards, (financial) prizes, pitching opportunities and (funded) residencies, so that when writers take a work to a regional theatre or look for a commercial producer, the work has already been through a significant development process that may have been partly supported by Arts Council R&D Funding, or competitive funded residencies, but might also have been entered into competitions that test the material in front of peers and audiences. Through this process a new show may have been worked on in different situations by directors, producers, choreographers, dramaturgs etc., who collaborate with writers, allowing the work to be seen in different iterations and in small parts until it is ready for production. Crucially, this diverse system does not rely on an end producer financing the entire process, but has a number of opportunities for investment or awards by sponsors, funders, institutions and organisations.

What I'm seeing in the models in the UK and US are many developmental opportunities as a new work journeys across the bridge from the subsidised to the commercial worlds, including private sponsorship and more supporting institutions. By contrast, in the Netherlands there appear to be two poles holding up the Commercial and Subsidised Theatres with little in between. As a visual concept I propose that a successful and innovative system might be like a Ponte Vecchio in Florence (with its several pillars and many shops and stopping off points for a new work as it journeys across) rather than a Nescio Bridge (that has a long empty road between its two supporting pillars). And perhaps what we have at the moment, in the case of musical theatre in the Netherlands, is a magnificent Erasmusbrug that has just one main point of support - the commercial producers. It works beautifully for a bridge, but might be bettered as a model for generating new musicals!

And to finish, a recent British success story that illustrates the many and diverse opportunities that have become available for the development of new work. *Operation Mincemeat: A New Musical* is currently playing at the tiny Fortune Theatre right next to Drury Lane. SpitLip, a physical and musical theatre collective, had pitched an idea to the New Diorama Theatre (a new fringe studio) and the Lowry in Salford (a regional theatre) who commissioned the project. The creative team were then supported by the Rhinebeck Writers Retreat in New York State through a competitive application process. The show had sold-out runs at the New Diorama Theatre, Southwark Playhouse and Riverside Studios (all fringe or off-West End venues) before transferring to The Fortune Theatre where the production's run has just been extended for a further 6 months.

I realise that the Netherlands has different structures, with limited numbers of regional producing houses, and with an absence of investors or angels to finance producers' creative risk-taking, which

may be partly because the returns are not sufficiently great in the current touring model. Audience numbers required in order to generate sufficient profits to pay back in royalties, need to be so much greater if touring costs have to be factored in. There is also the question of how public money can be used in a collaborative model. I also know that I'm probably speaking to the converted about the need for R&D money and time for writers to work with their collaborators, for models of workshop opportunities funded other than by producers, for tax breaks for investors and other kinds of financial support, so that finance isn't all coming either from government subsidy or the commercial producer's own pocket.

Some questions and a conclusion:

What opportunities might be created for experimentation and development?

What (financial) prizes and (sponsored) awards might be offered that support creative development in a competitive enough fashion so that innovation, new voices, and excellence, from wherever it arises, can be supported?

What collaborations might be activated between the Montagus and the Capulets or the Jets and the Sharks – by which I don't mean just fringe, regional, subsidised and commercial theatres, but also classical theatre, devised or physical theatre, popular music, musicals and even opera?

Ultimately, although we have to talk about money, the most important bridge that needs building is the one that will transform perceptions about how diverse in form and content musicals can be, about the kinds of music, dramaturgies and performance styles they embrace, and the stories they can tell.