

# IT'S SHOWTIME!

As musicals increasingly become a regular feature in opera companies around the world, is resistance to their presence in the opera house just old-fashioned snobbery or are there real artistic drawbacks to diluting the mainstream operatic fare?

*Antonia Couling* discovers that musicals can provide a lifeline that draws new audiences into the world of opera

From *Kiss Me, Kate* at Opera North and *Oklahoma!* at Grange Park Opera, to *Singin' in the Rain* at the Châtelet in Paris to *Showboat* at San Francisco Opera, the staging of musicals in opera houses is a trend which has been growing over the past two decades, as recession-hit opera houses began to struggle with the double whammy of declining funding and dwindling box-office. However, the move from hardcore opera into the lighter music theatre repertoire ignites heated debate in some quarters.

Nowhere has the programming of musicals been more contentious than at London's Coliseum, home to English National Opera. Hackles rose among opera traditionalists when an agreement

with production company GradeLinnet was signed in 2014 to stage five original musical productions over five years. The first was *Sweeney Todd*, starring Bryn Terfel and Emma Thompson, followed by *Carousel*, *Sunset Boulevard* and *Bat Out of Hell*. The latest was a production of *Chess* in May 2018.

Musical theatre certainly has a broader audience appeal than opera as long-running shows on Broadway and in the West End prove. It also dominates the commercial theatre sector, where audiences are willing to shell out big bucks on tickets. Opera houses can offer a very different aural experience, with full orchestra and chorus – something that a Broadway producer would never be able to afford. But is the programming of musicals in the opera

▼ *Chess* at English National Opera – blockbuster musicals at ENO have been shown to help to build opera audiences in the long run



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▲ Daniel Kramer: 'Gilbert & Sullivan's *Iolanthe* was the fourth-highest selling show we've ever done at ENO'

house simply a move to bring in cash, reducing the number of performances of core operatic repertoire and doing a disservice to loyal opera audiences?

Daniel Kramer, ENO's artistic director since 2016, is at pains to stress that there was a dire financial need to bring money into the building after the £5m cut to its budget in 2014: 'The company had to switch to a commercial model six months a year. So we rent GradeLinnet the space, the orchestra as they desire, as many members of our chorus as they will take and then they pay for one of our staff producers to line produce it, but we have no artistic input.' He also won't rule out the inclusion of musicals for ENO, should the agreement not be renewed, but only under certain circumstances: 'If we were restored to 14 main stage shows a season, we could programme a commercially viable season of 14 operas including two operettas, a big musical that would be magnified by the triumphant scale of our full forces, a couple of popular titles, a bit more arthouse with some fabulous rentals sporadically placed through it. That's a long-term goal. But with scraping pennies to manifest nine productions – I've finally got us up to 10 in 2020 – I think there would be way too much criticism about having one of 10 shows being a musical. Let's not forget that some of our most loyal audience members don't even love that we do operetta, which is our biggest seller year on year. Gilbert & Sullivan's *Iolanthe* was the fourth-highest selling show we've ever done at ENO.'

The secondary benefit to the house is that audiences for the opera season are also expanded: 'Ten per cent of people who came to *Sweeney Todd* have now come to see an opera at ENO. And we can track these things – within GDPR regulations. We know that people crossed over. We have one gentleman who came to see *Bat Out of Hell*, and then came to see every single opera this season. We have estimated a seven-year crossover timeline to get a first-time opera goer to become up to three shows a season, which

would probably include, let's say, a Berg or a Janáček. We have to remember that the average person goes to just one arts event per year in London. So do they choose *Harry Potter*? *Dreamgirls*? *Chess*? or *Traviata*? If we do snag 'em, then maybe next year we will snag 'em for two things.'

So, throwing musicals into the mix of an opera house season sounds like a win-win situation all round, providing something for everyone. This is something that Australian Barrie Kosky, the influential and outspoken artistic director at Berlin's Komische Oper, knows all about. His seasons invariably contain a lively and eclectic mix of opera and musical theatre which in 2018/19 includes Kosky's staging of *Fiddler on the Roof* and new productions of Bernstein's *Candide*, Paul Abraham's *Roxy and her Wonderteam*. 'I'm very lucky to have the only major opera house in the world that historically has presented opera, operetta *and* musicals since the beginning of its inception. The variety and diversity of what is defined as music theatre lies in the very DNA of the house since 1892. It's very much to do with the absolute conceptual belief that musicals belong on the tree that is music theatre, that musicals are in fact the grandchild of opera and they are part of a very important chapter in the history of European theatre.'

With such a clear threefold house identity, it's interesting to note that the audiences at the Komische respond accordingly: 'We don't view our audience as one homogenous block. There are opera audiences that come only for Baroque operas, only for the operetta and only for the musicals. There are audiences that come for just the Russian operas – there is a big Russian population in Berlin. So our entire marketing strategy is very multi-layered. It's much harder for opera houses to have just one identity that is grand opera to try and attract audiences, than it is for the Komische, because we are by nature schizophrenic.' Added to which, there is the bonus



of German subsidy, coupled with no West End scene within the country, so if an opera house puts on a musical, it will be the only musical in town.

Kosky is very vocal about the resistance among ENO audiences to changes in repertoire – changes that could mean the difference between life and death to the venue: ‘I’m sorry to say, but the English audiences are some of the least adventurous audiences in the world. So you’ve got ingrained snobbery and ignorance, and a complete misunderstanding of the nature of art and the nature of theatre and that institutions need to change, adapt, develop, metamorphise. This incredible, gobsmacking nostalgia for something that the English National Opera I don’t think ever was, is sort of laughable. Of course it has to change! The first thing that needs to change is the English-only language policy. We changed the German-only policy at the Komische, because it was a thing of the past. You can still maintain a sense of identity and history while performing in the original language. Singing operas in the vernacular just smacks of provincialism. No one wants to hear it. No one wants to go to it. The technology has changed. As long as audiences go in that door with a rose-coloured nostalgic memory of what they saw in the Pountney, Elder, Harwood years – which were fabulous, but over – you’re never going to move on.’

In North America, musicals are these days staple fare in most of the major opera companies – with only the Met holding out against the tide. Lyric Opera of Chicago seems to be seizing the moment for change with both hands and getting it right. General director Anthony Freud explains that the company is now in its sixth year of programming an annual musical production – Bernstein’s *West Side Story* is coming up next – with no reduction to the number of opera productions: ‘Firstly, we wanted to bring new people into the opera house. Secondly, it’s important to remember that our musicals are programmed after the end of our opera season. So we give our opera season of eight main-stage opera productions and then, when the opera house would have been dark in the past, we schedule a musical. It is only possible because we are one of the very few North American opera houses to own our house. And that means that we have a large wonderful opera house at our disposal and my hope is that we maximise its value to us and really make it a very hardworking asset for the organisation. Which brings me to the third reason which is that we want the musical to generate net income that we can use to help meet some of the losses which the opera season naturally incurs, as opera seasons do all over the world.’

The understanding of the need for the organisation’s reinvention is extremely thorough: ‘It’s not only the audience crossover that is valuable to us, but making Lyric a broader more relevant cultural service provider to the city in a range of different ways. Along with the community engagement programme and the musicals, we also programme rock concerts in the house.’

‘Recently we had the James Beard Culinary Awards, which is a big national TV awards evening for restaurant awards. We really try and make the opera house a focal point of diverse activity within the city, in order to make it more relevant to more people. And I think there is real potential for Lyric’s perception around the city to be changed as a result of that.’

‘It’s a matter of making us fitter for purpose as a world-class opera company, in a business environment that is more volatile

and less predictable than any of us can remember. It’s a matter of really trying to understand how to develop on the successes that the company has had over 60 years and to secure a really thriving energised dynamic future for ourselves. I do think that a large-scale opera company like Lyric needs to understand that we are working in a dramatically changing environment, culturally, socially, economically. The one thing we are *not* doing is compromising the opera season. In many ways the key motivation for broadening and diversifying our activity is to be able to maintain our focus on world-class opera at the right level. Our musicals are not replacing opera. That’s when you get into controversial territory and when people who are passionate about opera feel shortchanged.’

So maybe the audiences at ENO are justified in feeling shortchanged as they have had their operatic season reduced so radically, but citing musical theatre as the enemy may be short-sighted in terms of the basic survival of ENO, as well as misplaced. If Daniel Kramer is allowed to continue to build up the operatic season and if the audiences and powers that be can support a few bold decisions, a bright future for ENO could beckon. As he says: ‘We at ENO want to celebrate opera and operetta and all her great great grandchildren. There is a connection of heritage from *Hamilton* back to Handel.’ [ON](#)



IKO FRIESE

▲ Barrie Kosky’s staging of *Fiddler on the Roof* starring Max Hopp: ‘Musicals are the grandchild of opera – a very important chapter in the history of European theatre’

▼ Musicals help generate new income alongside traditional opera productions: *Jesus Christ Superstar* at the Lyric Opera of Chicago



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