

## Plays with Music

A pre-show talk for the premiere production of *Arms on Fire* by Steven Sater with music by Duncan Shiek at the Chester Theatre Company, June 28, 2013

By Talya Kingston.

It is unusual for Chester Theatre Company to produce a play with music, and here they are producing the world premiere by the celebrated musical theatre partnership of Steven Sater and Duncan Shiek, (best known for their musical *Spring Awakening* which won the 2007 Tony Award). *Arms on Fire* is being deliberately billed, not as a musical, but as a “play with music”. The play has been in development since 1999 and only recently, in 2010, was music added, along with a third character who does the majority of the singing. Sater said in a recent Boston Globe article that they saw an opportunity in this play to “use the songs in a really different and unusual way.”<sup>1</sup> The play’s director, Byam Stevens confirmed this, in an interview with me, saying that: “the play is enriched by its music, which provides forward momentum, opening up Ulysses’s (the protagonist’s) journey and giving it body.” But, he stresses that unlike a traditional musical it is first and foremost a play and “not a book as a vehicle for songs.”

I want to use this brief talk, to look at some of the ways that music is used in American theatre to flesh out the landscape (both emotional and physical), to develop character and to connect with audience, and suggest that the writers, composers and librettists are continually looking for new ways to use music in the theatre.<sup>2</sup> But before I launch in, a quick survey – when I reference musical theatre or plays with music, what works do you immediately think of?

When I think of music in the theatre, it sounds something like this:

CLIP ONE – “Some Enchanted Evening” from *South Pacific* sung here by Paulo Szot in the New Broadway cast recording.

Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein were the masters of the emotional ballad: a character is experiencing an emotion so intense that the spoken word can’t hold it, and we are swept into the song by an unseen orchestra. Characters can also connect with each other on this level through duets, as is seen later in *South Pacific* when “Some Enchanted Evening” is reprised. This may seem cheesy and manipulative to a modern sophisticated audience, but the beauty and intensity of the music is undeniable. And it is worth noting, that although Rogers and Hammerstein are now seen as the old standards that the likes of Sater and Sheik are moving away from, at the time, their musical *Oklahoma!* was revolutionary in form, breaking the old

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<sup>1</sup> Rodman, Sarah “In Chester, ‘Spring Awakening’ creators light ‘Arms on Fire’ *Boston Globe*, June 22, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Of course adding music to theatre is not a new invention, in fact music has been an integral part of the theatre experience since Ancient Greece and “melos” or melody is included as one of Aristotle six key ingredients to tragedy in *The Poetics*, but that history is part of a much broader talk.

musical comedy conventions, with a fully integrated book, and songs that delve into character and advance the plot.

Moving on to another American musical theatre darling, Steven Sondheim, we can immediately see the difference reflected in both the type of music he employs and the way that he uses his music to tell story.

CLIP TWO – “The Little Things You Do Together” from *Company* Original Broadway Cast Recording sung by Elaine Stritch and the ensemble.

This musical, *Company*, has virtually no plot, but instead explores the state of mind of its protagonist Robert (Bobby) and his married friends. But as you heard in the clip, the placement and function of Sondheim’s songs seems peculiar compared to songs in integrated musicals; here people generally don’t sing to, or with each other in a scene, but often across each other depicting conflicting thoughts existing in the same moment. As Sondheim himself put it: “ We had our songs interrupt the story and be sung mostly by people outside the scene commenting on the action taking place.”<sup>3</sup> Where does this place us, the audience members?

We are unable to be completely swept away by the emotions into a catharsis, but instead are dislocated observers or confidants. Put another way, while “Some Enchanted Evening” takes us into the character’s head, “The Little Things You Do Together” makes us laugh at the situation from the outside. In this song, when Elaine Stritch sings “mmm hmm” at the end of each verse it’s to us, the married people in the audience as a wink and a “you know what I mean...”

When Byam referred to musicals that have books that are just a vehicle for songs, I immediately thought of the so-called jukebox musicals that have been a staple on Broadway for the past decades (like *The Buddy Holly Story*, *Mama Mia*, *Jersey Boys*, *Rock of Ages* and *American Idiot*). These musicals rely on their audience members already knowing and loving the music that they are resurrecting, so that it becomes a toe tapping mutual celebration where any story is secondary and usually fairly unbelievably rendered. However, the precursor to the jukebox musicals was the concept musical, arguably the most beloved of which were the unexpected 1976 hit *A Chorus Line*. I’m sure that this is familiar to a lot of you, but for anyone who doesn’t know this play, it takes us behind the scenes at a Broadway audition.

CLIP THREE: Opening number from *A Chorus Line* (I hope I get it!) Original Broadway cast recording.<sup>4</sup>

Conceived out of interviews with actual New York musical theatre dancers (or gypsies as they were called) the musical goes on to give each dancer a turn to perform their back-story. The fact that this is then performed for an audience in a

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* by John Bush Jones, 2003: Brandeis University Press, p. 276.

<sup>4</sup> This opening number establishes the physical and emotional landscape of the show, much like “Oh what a beautiful morning!” does in *Oklahoma!* Or “Another hundred people” (just got off of the train) established the urban New York landscape as the opening number in *Company*.

theatre adds a sense of realism to the fact that we are watching singers and dancers sing and dance about being singers and dancers and creates the effect of a mirror into a mirror into a mirror. Since we are representatives of the audience that they are auditioning and rehearsing for, the songs can realistically be performed directly at us.<sup>5</sup>

A more explicit reflection of the concerns of the audience in the musical theatre, came in musicals such as *Hair*<sup>6</sup> (1967) and Jonathan Larson's *RENT* (1996). Both of these were again unexpected hits and, unlike the jukebox musicals which mostly rely on a sense of nostalgia in the audience, the music of both *Hair* and *RENT* came directly from the youth movements and concerns of the day, and the thrill was seeing that on Broadway. Just as *South Pacific* in its time had pushed social boundaries by depicting an inter-racial relationship, *RENT* (an updating of Puccini's *La Bohème*) depicted gay relationships, and the realities of young artists living in New York's East Village decimated by the AIDS epidemic and unaffordable rent increases.

Like *A Chorus Line*, *RENT* then places the audience in the situation of the artists on stage, but unlike *A Chorus Line* it implicated and challenged the audience reflecting broader societal problems.

CLIP FOUR: "What you Own" from *RENT*, Original Broadway Cast Recording.

Any discussion of the use of music to challenge the audience on social problems, needs to include some mention of the hugely influential early-Twentieth Century German playwright and theorist Bertolt Brecht. His criticism of sweeping emotional music is best stated in his own words (written in 1935):

"Most 'advanced' music nowadays is still written for the concert hall. A single glance at the audiences who attend concerts is enough to show how impossible it is to make any political or philosophical use of music that produces such effects. We see rows of human beings transported into a particular doped state, wholly passive, sunk without trace, seemingly in the grip of a severe poisoning attack. Their tense, congealed gaze shows that these people are the helpless and involuntary victims of unchecked lurchings of their emotions. Trickle of sweat prove how such excesses exhaust them. The worst gangster film treats its audience more like thinking beings. Music is cast in the role of Fate.... It seduces the listener in an enervating, because unproductive, act of enjoyment."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Also true for the 1966 Broadway musical (film *Cabaret*)

<sup>6</sup> Full name *Hair: the American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* book and lyrics by James Rado and Gerome Ragni and music by Galt MacDermot.

<sup>7</sup> "On the Use of Music in an Epic Theatre", quoted in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, edited and translated by John Willett (1964: Hill and Wang, New York) p.89 One of Brecht's most important principles was what he called the *Verfremdungseffekt* (translated as "defamiliarization effect", "distancing effect",

Brecht often used music in his plays, but in contrast to the sweeping emotion of Rogers and Hammerstein, he would use the music as a break to emphasize the social injustice being depicted. Putting the musicians on stage, shifting the light out of the setting of the story and letting his actor sing directly to the audience.

This aesthetic no-doubt influenced our writers, Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik in their own depiction of disillusioned and ill-prepared youth at the turn of the millennium. Their hit musical *Spring Awakening* is an interpretation of the play by Frank Wedekind, depicting the repressed lives of teenagers in the 1890s in Germany.<sup>8</sup> Rather than updating their version to a new era (like *RENT* had done with *La Bohème*) they stuck a rock score on top of the 1890s setting. The tension between the two settings, mirrored the inter-generational tension on stage and created a push and pull in the audience response that was incredibly compelling.

CLIP FIVE: "Mama Who Bore Me" (reprise) from *Spring Awakening* sung by Lauren Pritchard, Lea Michele, Lilli Cooper, Phoebe Strole and Remy Zaken. Original Broadway cast recording.

The songs are then deliberately separated from the plot, and are instead used as a direct way for the audience to enter the character's state of mind, like a Shakespearean soliloquy. Composer Duncan Sheik has put this down to his background in song writing rather than musical theatre, saying: "I got lucky in terms of being naïve about how songs function in traditional musical... I wrote the songs for the score the way I would write them for one of my albums. All I'm really concerned about is the song working on its own, within its own context... I'm just not that interested in telling a story or being part of a larger narrative."<sup>9</sup> Playwright Steven Sater reiterates this saying: "It's a tricky slope to climb, to find a song for the character at that moment, to further the story but not the plot."<sup>10</sup> Duncan Sheik goes on to explain that: "Steven's lyrics can seem amorphous and poetic, kind of moody. But if you scan them really closely, they are extremely specific to each moment in the show. They're not necessarily advancing the plot, but they are deepening the emotional moment of those characters within those scenes....It's a musical moment of emotional intensity."<sup>11</sup>

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or "estrangement effect", and often mistranslated as "alienation effect") this involved interrupting the emotional arc of the action with on-stage costume changes, commentary or sub-titles projected or spoken on stage, direct address to the audience and most importantly for this talk – songs.

<sup>8</sup> I must admit that when I first heard about this source material, I was one of the naysayers who publically stated "they are doing a musical based on WHAT?!" and was then blown away by their vision in the New York production.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in *Spring Awakening: in the flesh* by David Cote (2008: New York, Simon Spotlight Entertainment).

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

After you see *Arms on Fire*, I'd be interested in how you experienced the music in this play, how it deepened the landscape of the characters, did it allow you access, for example to their inner-emotional worlds or back-story? I don't think I'm giving too much away if I say that the music is Latin-inspired and the setting is a Hell's Kitchen apartment in New York. I'm wondering if the character of the music as well as the lyrics and performance might serve as exposition and alluding to the ethnicity of the character of Ulysses, his back-story and prior life. I'm wondering how in this production we, the audience, are included in the music – are we addressed in a different way when the music is happening (in this landscape of memory) than we are during the dialogue? Or is the singing happening between the characters on stage and exclusive of us?

Back to the billing of this as a “play with music” rather than a musical, I would argue that the mere act of putting music into a play does not make it a musical, however, the main problem with billing something as a musical has more to do with how this billing influences an audience member's expectations. When we hear “it's a musical” we expect the sort of vapid enjoyment that Brecht scorned rather than the kind of thoughtful engagement and deep character development that is actually more typical of contemporary musical theatre writers, certainly of the caliber of Sater and Sheik. I hope you enjoy the play.