

## Opinion: **ENO** and musicals on the opera stage



English National Opera's *Sunset Boulevard* opens in April 2016

With the success of 2014's *Sweeney Todd* behind it, English National Opera seems to be backtracking on intentions to transfer its big-name, semi-staged musicals to theatres in the West End. So how can the company justify programming *Sunset Boulevard* for 2016, asks Christopher Gillett – who, as you may have guessed, is not a fan...



A lot of people are excited about *Sunset Boulevard* coming to ENO next year (<https://www.eno.org/whats-on/sunset-boulevard>). It may not come as much of a surprise that I'm not one of them.

I'm not troubled by an opera company doing musicals. I know the arguments: West End theatres can't do justice to some of the big scores as they were originally composed, and many musicals are worthy of being taken seriously. Heck, given the choice between Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* or Bernstein's *On The Town*, for me it would be the Bernstein any day. *South Pacific* is a score that I'd like to hear with full orchestra and

chorus. *West Side Story*, too.

But yet more Andrew Lloyd Webber in London? In a semi-staging? For let's make no mistake about this, the budget for these shows doesn't run to a full production with scenery – the sort of show that people are used to seeing in the West End. At the Coliseum, they're providing a dramatised concert version, something designed with only a temporary run in mind.

The main argument for ENO doing musicals is that it's supposed to make them a shedload of money in the long term. It's a bit of commercialism to pull in the crowds and help pay for the other stuff, the opera. They even claim it might encourage people to go to the Coliseum more regularly, but if anyone can prove that actually works, I'll be very surprised. The leap from *Sweeney Todd* to *The Force of Destiny* isn't one that's casually made.

## **I have never understood the business model**

The thing that exercises my mind the most is the business model. I have never understood it. When ENO and its co-producers on this scheme, Michael Grade and Michael Linnit, announced their joint venture, [Grade said \(http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-27206585\)](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-27206585): 'We'll put the resources and creative energy into a show that would do a short season here and then it would go straight into the West End. It will hopefully have a long life beyond its launch at the Coliseum and offer a new source of revenue for ENO and new audiences as well.'

But – and this is the bit I don't get – a West End transfer surely is (and always was) out of the question. It certainly was for *Sweeney Todd*, ENO's last musical: that much was clear the moment it was announced. For starters, both *Sweeney* and *Sunset* are vehicles for big stars – Emma Thompson and Bryn Terfel in the Sondheim, and Glenn Close in the Lloyd Webber – none of whom are surely interested in anything but a short run in a big theatre for a handsome fee.

Secondly, both shows follow the same model, with a full-sized orchestra on the stage and no scenery. It's not a model that will transfer to a West End theatre, especially as no commercial theatre can afford the same orchestra that the publicly-subsidised ENO can provide.

## **It's hardly the stuff to draw the coach parties and tourists on whom musicals rely**

A transfer with no big stars, no scenery, no big orchestra... it's hardly the stuff to draw coach parties from the suburbs and the tourists on whom musicals rely. Apart from the fact that no West End producer would touch it with a bargepole, how could a transfer have succeeded without dramatically and expensively changing the format around which the original show was planned? It would be a different show altogether.

Now it seems that the penny has dropped for ENO's chief executive, Cressida Pollock, [who admitted last week that West End transfers are indeed an unlikely prospect \(https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2015/eno-poised-to-appoint-new-artistic-leader-following-john-berrys-departure/\)](https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2015/eno-poised-to-appoint-new-artistic-leader-following-john-berrys-departure/). So, was Michael Grade telling a load of porky pies last year, or was the scheme just poorly-conceived by ENO's previous management?

If the shows have no life beyond the Coliseum, that's fine. Take the money and run. But then why have a couple of cigar-chomping producers involved in the process (and taking a cut of the box office) at all? Even without the scenery, these shows are still costly to mount, requiring a larger cast than many operas all imported from outside the company. What do Grade and Linnit bring to the table that cannot be sourced more cheaply elsewhere or even in-house?

## **I defy anyone in the artistic management of ENO to stand up and make the artistic case for doing Lloyd Webber**

It will be interesting to see how much money ENO can make off *Sunset Boulevard*. As it's a commercial venture, financial profit really is the only reason to do this, for I defy anyone in the artistic management of ENO to stand up and make the artistic case for doing Lloyd Webber. I do wonder whether anyone at ENO has read Frank Rich's *The Hot Seat*, which notes that *Sunset Boulevard* once set the record for the most money lost by a theatrical endeavour in US history.

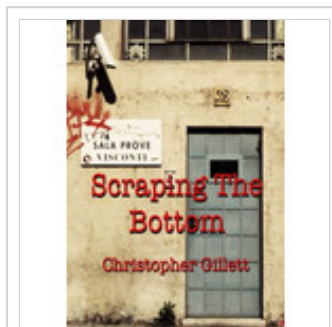
Let's just hope it doesn't do the same for English National Opera.

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## Recommended



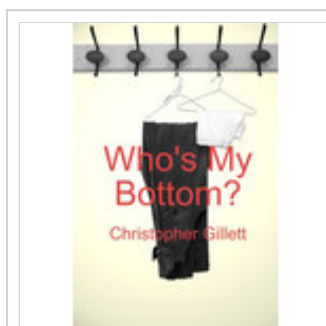
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