

Palgrave Studies in British Musical Theatre

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Britain's contribution to musical theatre in the late twentieth century is known and celebrated across the world. In historiographies of musical theatre, this assertion of British success concludes the twentieth century narrative that is otherwise reported as an American story. Yet the use of song and music in UK theatre is much more widespread than is often acknowledged. This series teases out the nuances and the richness of British musical theatre in three broad areas: British identity; Aesthetics and dramaturgies; Practices and politics.

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Millie Taylor

Theatre Music and Sound at the RSC

Macbeth to Matilda

palgrave
macmillan

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In memory of my parents, whose love and support made everything possible.

FOREWORD

The Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), founded by Peter Hall in 1960, is one of Britain's most revered institutions, celebrating one of its most beloved writers. With a home in the picturesque Midlands market town of Stratford-upon-Avon where Shakespeare lived, it boasts quite legitimately of being one of the world's foremost theatre companies.

Stratford itself, despite its bustling traffic and its proximity to major motorways, still holds on to its chocolate box image as a quaint historic centre: characteristic half-timbered buildings and thatched cottages line the streets; a pretty canal basin dominates the Eastern edge of the town; and the imposing Royal Shakespeare Theatre presides over the waterfront, serving as a focal point for the millions of visitors who flock to Stratford every year.

It's unlikely that many of these visitors seek out Shakespeare's birthplace with music in mind—his plays are known far more for their use of language, and his legacy is as a master of the spoken word. Yet as Millie Taylor argues persuasively in this book, Shakespeare's theatre is steeped in music, creating resonant atmospheres in which to set the plays; colourful characters whose charm is often expressed in song; and, later in his career, plays whose forms adopt musical structures and present musical idioms as languages in themselves—communicative strategies through which the world of Shakespeare's imagination comes to life.

Throughout these pages, Taylor explores that world in its musical voicings, considering explicit gestures towards music that can be found in the texts of the plays; interviewing musicians, composers and musical directors

who have contributed to the way the plays sound in performance; and—perhaps most significantly—arguing that the RSC over the years has nurtured a profound understanding of how Shakespeare’s legacy can be articulated musically as much as through the spoken word.

In its almost 60 years, the Stratford company has created an exciting laboratory for the interpretation of that legacy. It has benefitted from significant public subsidy, as Taylor notes; from the luxury of robust resources; and from the opportunity to recruit and employ a dedicated company who over numerous successive projects have been able to explore the various languages of Shakespeare’s theatre. In her strands of analysis, we learn how musical practices have been passed down as new musical directors have inherited from the past; we see how different interpretations of a single play in multiple iterations present a picture of working practices, technologies and contexts as they develop; and we gain from Taylor’s close engagement with both the composers and their scores an intimate knowledge of how Shakespeare’s musical imagination has been brought to life.

Readers of this book may be surprised to discover it within this book series, Palgrave Studies in British Musical Theatre, since Shakespeare’s canon is typically viewed as the antithesis of musical theatre: where Shakespearean theatre is highly valued as a cultural form, musical theatre is often seen as a populist and commercial mode of entertainment; where Shakespearean texts are esteemed by principled lovers of the arts, musicals are often seen as fodder for the masses; and where Shakespeare’s plays are celebrated as works of literature, musicals are often derided as trite bits of floss. Yet Taylor’s resounding success in this book is to evidence the continuum that the RSC has fostered between the musicodramatic world that colours Shakespeare’s plays and the same sort of landscape that creates the rich textures found in the delights of a musical. It therefore comes as no surprise to be reminded that the RSC has in fact been a driving force behind a number of the most important contributions to the musical stage in recent years. In Taylor’s final chapters, she turns to the development of these works—not only the obvious examples of *Les Misérables* (1985) and *Matilda* (2010), but also productions that are not really viewed as musicals but which nevertheless construct in their formats pieces of theatre that are in everything but name, musical theatre works—*The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (1980) and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1998). In each of these cases, she considers how their adaptation from literary texts in many ways resembles the sort of adaptations that

the RSC has perennially explored in its interpretation of the Shakespeare classics.

In this sense, we can view the RSC not just as an organisation with a “straight theatre” and a “musical theatre” wing, but instead as a company with a coherent mission to further the creative possibilities of the stage using all of the tools at its disposal. And by extension, we can read into this analysis a synecdoche for British theatre more widely. For as Taylor notes throughout her book, the landscape of British theatre as a whole has embraced music in its texture throughout its history, whether that be in the traditional forms of pantomime, the innovative developments of regional, community and children’s theatre, or in other institutional establishments such as the National Theatre which itself has created some of the most striking musicals of recent years (*Jerry Springer: The Opera; London Road*). Indeed, if British musical theatre is to be recognised as a creative idiom in its own right, it is perhaps this continuum of practices, eloquently demonstrated by the work of the RSC, that most articulately frames a national style. Thus British musical theatre creates a dialogue with the Broadway idiom, with which it interweaves but never quite attempts to clone; and with its distinct voice it generates works that are quintessentially British: from *Cavalcade* to *Cats*, from *Salad Days* to *Billy Elliot*, from *The Rocky Horror Show* to *Return to the Forbidden Planet*, and as explored in the odyssey of this book, from *Macbeth* to *Matilda*.

2018

Dominic Symonds

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It's very hard to know where to start with acknowledgements on this project—there are so many people who have given their time, their knowledge and their expertise in the development of this book.

Right at the start of this project Jane Woolfenden organised a lunch at which I was able to talk to Guy Woolfenden and Michael Tubbs. This was fundamental to the development of my thinking, but was also indicative of the supportive and collaborative way in which so many people contributed to the project. At a much later stage after the chapters were largely drafted Jane Woolfenden added further stories, clarifications and corrections. The other person who contributed to the project throughout the process was Roger Howells who I saw on a number of occasions at the Birthplace Trust Archive and who not only gave interviews but sent me materials from his own records. These early supportive encounters encouraged me to develop this text in a form that is inclusive of the voices of many others.

The next group of people I spoke to were the musicians, whose work generally goes unnoticed in theatre contexts; I am grateful to James Jones, Ian Reynolds, Richard Sandland and Andy Stone-Fewings. Alongside this group I will include Stephen Brown of the Midland Branch of the Musicians' Union who filled in and clarified some of the issues the musicians had raised, and Valerie Wells who searched for and sent materials from the Musicians' Union archive at Stirling University. Several music directors, music advisors or heads of music gave of their time and memories, not least of which were Guy Woolfenden and Michael Tubbs, but this group also includes Richard Brown and Bruce O'Neil. The composer

I spent most time with was Ilona Sekacz who invited me to spend a day with her, who responded to my questions and offered memories, music clips and examples of scores. Gary Yershon also gave a detailed and deeply thoughtful interview, while Adrian Lee and Dixie Peaslee (on behalf of her husband Richard Peaslee) sent information by email.

On the development of the sound department and sound design there was Roger Howells starting the conversation followed by David Collison, Leo Leibowicz, John Leonard and Jeremy Dunn. Alongside the discussion of the development of sound, mention must be made of the pioneering work of Delia Derbyshire whose archive is being explored and analysed by David G. Butler of Manchester University. He helped me to source the documents relating to her interaction with the RSC at the John Rylands Library.

The various archivists at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), Stirling University Library, John Rylands Library and the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust have all offered supportive advice as well as documents, videos and other materials. The staff of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust archive, where the RSC's collections are housed, has been the most fundamental to this project. I enjoyed my many visits to Stratford-on-Avon, where the team was wonderful, going backwards and forwards to find obscure materials for me, showing me how to search for images, and even letting me sit in the vaults looking through programmes to discover the names and numbers of musicians at different stages of the RSC's history. My thanks to all of the team.

Julia Nottingham who licences images at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and Michelle Morton in a similar position at the RSC have helped me to make choices, put up with me changing my mind and worked through the mess of permissions, licences and paperwork to make sure I have been able to include appropriate photographs, scores and documents from their archives in this book. I can't thank them enough for their patience and attention to detail. And of course, my thanks also go to all the photographers and composers, as well as the performers in the photographs for granting permission to include their work. At the head of all this sits an organisation, the RSC, whose staff have been unfailingly helpful in the development of this book, demonstrating interest and offering support at every stage. Without that much of this would have been impossible.

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