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TONY BLAIR: THE MUSICAL

In 2007 the musical political satire, TONY! The Blair Musical, made a splash at the Edinburgh Fringe, garnering rave reviews in the national and local press and winning the inaugural Sunday Times NSDF Edinburgh Fringe Competition. The show, which went on to a short London run, told the story of Tony Blair's rise and fall, beginning with Labour's landslide victory in 1997 and ending at the time of his hand-over to Gordon Brown 10 years later. Told mainly from Blair's own perspective and including musical numbers such as the lament "No Me in Tony" and a barbershop quartet of former Tory leaders, it was an irreverent take on a serious subject.

Here TONY!'s writer and lyricist, Chris Bush, whose most recent work, Lost Soul Music, is running at the Pleasance Islington until 14 March, tells us about blending musical theatre and political satire.

TONY! The Blair Musical was very much a Fringe show: the right show at the right time. He was stepping down just weeks before the festival; it was so topical. But it wasn't just that. There's this idea that political theatre has to be David Hare-esque, earnest, hand-wringing social realism, where you come with your agenda and you express it via serious people in dark suits having serious conversations. That's all well and good but that's not the kind of theatre that particularly interests me. I think there's more you can do with political theatre.

It's very easy to preach to the choir and write a play with a manifesto that everyone who comes to see it will already agree with. There are certain political plays where essentially you can read a blurb and know exactly what the conclusion of that play is going to be before you see it. Unless it's doing something truly amazing with that story, I always look at those plays and think, 'what's the point?'

I took a show to the Edinburgh Fringe for the first time in 2006. Later that year I met the composer Ian McCluskey and we decided we'd try and find a big project to work together on. It was around Christmas that, having watched a double-bill of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat and Evita, I had a flash of inspiration that if Tony Blair wasn't quite Eva Peron, he probably at least thought he was. The show came on from there.

If you go to the Fringe now you expect see a certain amount of Whatever, exclamation mark, the Musical, but I think the reason why TONY! had more validity was because it was a story that very much leant itself to musical adaptation. Not only do you have a very compelling narrative of his 10 years in power and a proper dramatic rise and fall, but you've also got Blair as a musical figure - from his university rock star days to posing with his Stratocaster - so the musical form complemented the narrative.

I was very cautious about not producing a piece of agitprop; whatever my own feelings about Blair might have been, I felt that the show shouldn't be about expressing certain political allegiances. Rather than pushing an agenda, it was about Blair the person and the relationships between the various figures surrounding him. Our aim wasn't to attack anyone in particular; everyone came in for their fair share of ridicule and I think that was the far more effective way of doing it. We were ridiculing rather than vilifying. Ultimately it was about creating an entertaining piece of theatre.

Chris Bush was talking to Jo Caird