

MUSIC TEACHER

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SHOWTIME

Musical theatre is a genre with the potential to bring classroom music to life. Jo Caird explores the opportunities for learning offered by the West End's musical theatre productions

The Phantom of the Opera, The Lion King, Mamma Mia... These musicals have been running in London's West End for such a long time – Phantom is now in its 26th year – that they've become part of the British public consciousness. Even if you haven't seen these shows, you can probably name their writers or protagonists and even hum some of their songs.

You may not be aware, however, that all these musicals and many others currently running in the West End have accompanying education packs stuffed full of practical ideas that you can use in the classroom to motivate and inspire your students. Of course, taking your class to see a West End show isn't cheap, but there is undoubtedly a huge amount to be gained from taking children to see live theatre if the resources are available – and the shows' accompanying education packs mean that you can potentially build a whole term's work around the visit.

Linda Turner is education manager at the theatre education charity Mousetrap Theatre Projects (mousetrap.org.uk), which produces education packs on behalf of a number of West End shows. She believes that seeing live theatre 'opens up young people's imaginations', giving them insight not just into the worlds being created on stage, but also into the theatre industry itself.

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'We're always trying to get them to look at all the different creative roles that go into making theatre, so that they don't think this thing they're seeing on stage is the only creative element', she says – adding that young people might be

inspired by music-related careers they didn't know existed, from pit musicians and musical directors to composers and sound engineers.

Helen Cadbury, who has written education resource packs for a wide range of shows, including West End musicals, points to 'all the transferable skills and the additional learning that can go on from a visit to the theatre'. This might mean researching the history of 1970s music after a visit to Mamma Mia, or exploring how music is used to develop





character in *The Lion King* or *The Phantom of the Opera*.

Many education packs provide information or activities to help prepare young people for their visit to the theatre. One such example is the study guide accompanying *We Will Rock You*, the musical based around the songs of the rock group Queen, which gives background information about the story and the major characters.

It can also be valuable to discuss children's expectations around what a live theatre performance will be like and how they should behave at the theatre. *The Wizard of Oz* has its final performance in the West End this month, but its study guide will still be available and offers some excellent suggestions about preparing young people for a theatre visit. It asks children to think about other performances they might

have seen, such as nativity plays or assemblies, and consider the professional production in a similar light. The fact that the music in the show is played live, by 'real' musicians, is also flagged up – a visit to a West End show might be a child's first experience of live music played professionally, so has the potential to be an important staging post in their musical education. Cadbury, who co-wrote the study guide to *The Wizard of Oz*, explains that 'to make sure young people enjoy live theatre we mustn't assume they're all used to going to it. The difference for young people who've had some preparation and those who haven't is enormous'.

If a visit to the theatre isn't possible, plenty of excellent work can be done in the classroom using shows' education packs alone or in conjunction with other resources. Most packs

are free to download from the individual shows' websites, so teachers can read a wide range of different study guides and hand pick the activities and ideas that will best suit them and their students.

West End shows offer a great framework for introducing young people to new genres of music. The DVD that accompanies the education pack of *The Lion King*, for example, shows former Blue Peter presenter Matt Baker in conversation with one of the show's percussionists, who explains the importance of African drumming in the show. The show's pack for primary schools outlines some of the traits of African music. Teachers could play the soundtrack to *The Lion King* or some traditional African music to children, before asking them to practise features such as different rhythms or call and response. Putting potentially challenging aspects of music theory in context makes them not just more accessible, but also fun. Given that most children will already be familiar with some of the songs from *The Lion King* from having watched the animated film, this show could be an easy starting point for teachers looking to explore West End musicals in lessons.

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Education packs can also be valuable when it comes to exploring ideas about how music can be used in storytelling. The study guide to *The Phantom of the Opera* prompts teachers to play songs to the pupils from the musical's soundtrack and analyse the different ways that they affect the listener. 'How do you think the composer makes you feel a certain way (what instruments are used, what rhythms, what harmonies, etc)?' is one suggested point for discussion. The pack also contains information on the plot and characters of the show, so teachers will find themselves well equipped to guide students through these questions. Many songs tell a story, of course, but the narrative framework surrounding songs in musical theatre makes them a particularly good springboard for this type of discussion.

Experienced teachers – those who have been teaching the same material for a number of years – may find that education packs can help them to invigorate their approach to a particular topic. The study guide to *Grease* (which is no longer running in the West End, but will be touring the UK until 30 December) includes an activity page on 'writing your own teenage love song' that

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uses songs from the musical as a novel route into the songwriting element of GCSE music. An additional activity involves the opening of the song *Those Magic Changes*, prompting students to write lyrics for the melody section and compose new music to continue the song.

Education packs are also a fantastic resource for primary school teachers who feel nervous at the idea of teaching music at all. Teach First ambassador Isobel Marshall, who taught at Oasis Academy Shirley Park in Croydon before moving to Uganda to work with music charity Sound Foundation, describes how education packs can 'act as a scaffold' for teachers who

lack confidence in their own musicality. The *Lion King's* primary study guide is particularly helpful for those hoping to build their confidence, as it outlines learning objectives, a lesson plan and extension activities.

Whether you're already a fan of musical theatre or will be discovering it alongside your students, the education packs of West End shows provide an exciting opportunity to bring new activities and ideas into the classroom. To quote Irving Berlin, one of the great musical theatre lyricists of the 20th century: 'There's no business like show business... Let's go on with the show!' **MT**

PICK OF THE SHOWS

The Lion King

One of the best education packs available to classroom music teachers is the one that accompanies *The Lion King*. Disney's animated film about Simba the lion cub was released in 1994. In 1997 a musical theatre adaptation of the film opened in the US, where it won five Tony Awards, including Best Musical. The London production opened at the Lyceum Theatre in 1999 and has been running there ever since. Featuring music by Elton John and lyrics by Tim Rice, a score by Hans Zimmer and choral arrangements by Lebo M, the show offers a great introduction to African-style music. Disney has produced separate education packs for primary and secondary level, which give useful information on how activities link to the UK's national curriculums. A DVD is also available which gives students behind-the-scenes access to the show, including interviews with creatives.

The Phantom of the Opera

Give your students a novel introduction to the world of opera via *The Phantom of the Opera*, which tells how a beautiful soprano becomes the obsession of a mysterious and deformed musical genius who lives a secretive existence at the Paris Opera. The show, which opened at Her Majesty's Theatre in 1986, has played to over 100 million people in 27 countries worldwide, allowing it to boast the highest box office takings of all time for any film or stage play. Andrew Lloyd Webber's score is often described as a 'rock opera' rather than a musical because, like an opera, it is almost entirely 'through-sung'. The production's study guide encourages students to consider the relationship between music and emotion, as well as prompting discussions about the characteristics of musicals and operas.

Mamma Mia!

Mamma Mia!, which has run at various West End theatres since 1999, is a good example of the genre known as the 'jukebox musical'. A jukebox musical is a show that uses previously released songs in its score. *Mamma Mia!* is a fictional story built around the songs of 1970s Swedish pop group ABBA, including their hits 'Dancing Queen', 'Take a Chance on Me' and 'Money, Money, Money'. Students may have seen the 2008 film adaptation of the show, which starred Meryl Streep. *Mamma Mia!*'s education pack explores the music of the 1970s, examining the relationship between music and history.

