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MUSICAL THEATRE'S BIG ISSUE

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The West End – and consequently venues across the UK – is filled with musicals written around pop songs and adapted from films. These shows – *Mamma Mia!*, *We Will Rock You*, *Zoro*, *Dirty Dancing* and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* to name but a few – are undoubtedly popular, if not critical, successes. Many have been running for several years and attract packed houses; there is clearly something very appealing to audiences about being able to sing along to their favourite rock and pop songs or follow the exploits of their film heroes live on stage.

But what effect is this glut of second-hand musicals having on the industry as a whole and how can musical theatre practitioners hope to make a mark in such a creatively-closed off atmosphere?

The West End, it seems, is a lost cause. There is really only one show that qualifies as a 'new' musical currently running in the West End. It is *Spring Awakening*, a 2006 adaptation of the 1891 Frank Wedekind play. The only other 'original' musicals currently running are West End transfers of revivals, such as *La Cage aux Folles*, and those that first opened years ago. *Les Misérables*, *Avenue Q* and *Chicago* are excellent shows, but with almost 40 years of running-time between them, can hardly be vaunted as 'new'.

It is unsurprising that commercial producers stick with adaptations from films and productions that recycle chart hits; they know that these shows will guarantee bums on seats. Theatre makers wishing to develop new musical theatre work would therefore do better to look to the fringes and the subsidised sector as a more welcoming context, where the emphasis is less about profit and more about creative risk-taking.

The past few years has seen ambitious productions of new musicals at venues such as the **BATTERSEA ARTS CENTRE**, **THEATRE ROYAL STRATFORD EAST** and **SHEFFIELD THEATRES**, but the genre can hardly be said to be thriving. Revivals and straight plays are still undoubtedly the major element of most theatres' programmes.

The obvious difficulty of course is the cost implication of producing such work. The larger creative team necessary for a musical will require a longer development process than would be usual for a straight play. The rehearsal period must also be longer and therefore more expensive, as not only actors, but also musicians, prepare for the production. The running costs of a new musical are also considerably higher than a straight play.

Neil Marcus of **MERCURY MUSICAL DEVELOPMENTS**, which nurtures new musical theatre writing in the UK, sees small-scale production of new musicals as the solution to this problem.

'Certainly producers can commission and finance large scale musicals but there seems to be a trend towards more intimate shows such as *Departure Lounge* which won best musical at The Edinburgh fringe or *Jet Set Go!* at **JERMYN STREET** which makes it possible for fringe and rep theatres to take more of a risk.'

Which is exactly what happened last year when director Adam Lenson took a punt on a new American musical called *Ordinary Days* that he found on MySpace.com. The show ran for only five Sunday and Monday performances at the tiny **FINBOROUGH THEATRE** and received mixed reviews, but this October Lenson is returning to the venue with another new American musical, *Little Fish*, this time for a proper run. **SPEAKING TO WHATSONSTAGE.COM LAST YEAR** Lenson said, 'We need to create more situations where new musicals can be put on but also convince audiences they are worth fighting for.'

Realistically the only way that producers are going to start putting more money into new musicals is if they can see the possibility of profit, and for that to happen, British audiences need to be more willing to take risks themselves and go and see these musicals, rather than just opting for an entertaining but safe experience at *Phantom of the Opera*, *Dirty Dancing* or *Sister Act*.

Musical theatre practitioners need to start small, build a trusting audience and work their way up. The musical-theatre-loving British public is there, singing along to *Grease* and *Hairspray*, it's just a matter of redirecting their attentions to the new work being produced. It will take commitment and a huge amount of hard work, but if all goes to plan it won't be long before they're singing along to some different tunes.

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