

**Harmony and discord within the English 'Counter-Culture', 1965-1975, with particular reference to the 'Rock Operas' *Hair, Godspell, Tommy* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*.**

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This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Queen Mary, University of London

## **Declaration**

The work presented in this thesis is my own. This thesis consists of 99,999 words, inclusive of footnotes and excluding bibliography.

Signed:

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20 November 2011

## **Abstract**

This thesis considers the discrete, historically-specific theatrical and musical sub-genre of 'Rock Opera' as a lens through which to examine the cultural, political and social changes that are widely assumed to have characterised 'The Sixties' in Britain. The musical and dramatic texts, creation and production of *Hair* (1967), *Tommy* (1969), *Godspell* (1971), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970) and other neglected 'Rock Operas' of the period are analysed. Their great popularity with 'mainstream' audiences is considered and contrasted with the overwhelmingly negative and often internally contradictory reaction towards them from the English 'counter-culture'. This examination offers new insights into both the 'counter-culture' and the 'mainstream' against which it claimed to define and differentiate itself.

The four 'Rock Operas', two of which are based upon Christian scriptures, are considered as narratives of spiritual quest. The relationship between the often controversial quests for re-defined forms of faith and the apparently precipitous 'secularization' and 'de-Christianization' of British society during the 1960s and 1970s is considered.

The thesis therefore analyses the 'Rock Operas' as significant, enlightening prisms through which to view many of the profound societal debates – over 'faith' and 'belief' in the widest senses, sexuality, the Vietnam war, generational conflict, drugs and 'spiritual enlightenment', and race – which were, to some considerable extent, elevated onto the national, political agenda by the activities of the broadly-defined 'counter-culture'. It considers subsequent representations of the 'counter-culture' as the root of a contested but enduring popular legacy of 'The Sixties' as a period of profound cultural change.

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## Table of Contents

Declaration	2
Abstract	3
Acknowledgements	4
Table of Contents	5
List of images	7
<b>CHAPTER ONE:</b>	8
<b>Introduction</b>	
1.1 'Strange thing, mystifying': The 'Rock Opera' genre	8
1.2 The historiography of 'The Sixties'	15
1.3 The counter-culture and the 'Counter-Culturalists'	21
<b>CHAPTER TWO:</b>	28
<b>From 'Pop' music to 'Rock' music, 1965-69</b>	
<b>CHAPTER THREE:</b>	40
<b><i>Hair</i>: Origins, working methods, text and music</b>	
3.1 The prototype Rock Opera	40
3.2 Origins, working methods, text and music	41
<b>CHAPTER FOUR:</b>	61
<b>London Theatre during 'The Sixties', the Lord Chamberlain, and <i>Hair</i></b>	
4.1 What Was On in London?	61
4.2 The Lord Chamberlain and <i>Hair</i>	71
<b>CHAPTER FIVE:</b>	85
<b><i>Hair</i> in London: Production, performance and reception</b>	
<b>CHAPTER SIX:</b>	111
<b>Counter-cultural reactions to <i>Hair</i> in London, and <i>Hair</i> and its creators since the 1970s</b>	
6.1 'Shallow simulacrum': Counter-cultural reactions to <i>Hair</i> in London	111
6.2 <i>Hair</i> and its creators since the 1970s	129
6.3 Coda: The 2007-10 Broadway and West End revival	135
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN:</b>	139
<b>The post-<i>Hair</i> wave and <i>Godspell</i></b>	
7.1 The post- <i>Hair</i> wave	139
7.2 <i>Godspell</i> : the 'clean' <i>Hair</i> ? – origins and text	145
7.3 Musical score	153

<b>CHAPTER EIGHT:</b>	158
<b><i>Godspell</i> in London</b>	
8.1 Production, marketing, and working methods	158
8.2 Critical reaction	172
8.3 Coda: <i>Godspell</i> since the 1970s – ‘community spirit appears to be dead these days’	176
 <b>CHAPTER NINE</b>	 179
<b><i>Tommy</i>: the 1969 album</b>	
9.1 Origins and influences	179
9.2 Text and music	192
9.3 Critical reaction	209
 <b>CHAPTER TEN</b>	 217
<b><i>Tommy</i> live, on film and on the theatrical stage</b>	
10.1 <i>Tommy</i> live: the birth of ‘stadium rock’	217
10.2 Ken Russell’s 1975 film	227
10.3 Coda: <i>The Who</i> ’s <i>Tommy</i> reaches Broadway and the West End	239
 <b>CHAPTER ELEVEN:</b>	 244
<b><i>Jesus Christ Superstar</i></b>	
11.1 The 1970 album: origins, text and music	244
11.2 Live in the USA	255
11.3 <i>Superstar</i> in London	259
 <b>CHAPTER TWELVE:</b>	 267
<b>Religion and the Rock Operas</b>	
12.1 ‘Believing without belonging’: the religious ‘crisis’ of the 1960s and the rise of the ‘New Age’	267
12.2 The Rock Operas and St Paul’s Cathedral	273
 <b>CHAPTER THIRTEEN:</b>	 285
<b>Conclusion</b>	
 <b>List of Sources</b>	 290

## List of images

1. Princess Anne steps off the stage of the Shaftesbury Theatre. *Daily Mail*, 16/04/1969. 95
2. *Hair* 'generic freak' image used for publicity in the USA and the UK. <http://www.hairtribes.com/> (accessed 27/03/2007). 114
3. The *Godspell* publicity image on a programme for the Round House production. 160
4. The publicity poster for Ken Russell's 1975 film of *Tommy*. 231
5. VE Day celebrations as Tommy is born. 231
6. Tommy's mother Nora (Ann-Margret), young Tommy (Barry Winch) and Frank (Oliver Reed). 232
7. Nora tends to her adult son (Roger Daltrey). 232
8. Nora is engulfed by the products advertised on her television set. 233
9. The Pinball Wizard (Elton John) is challenged by Tommy. 233
10. The Pinball Wizard, close to defeat, surrounded by (from left to right), John Entwistle, Keith Moon, Roger Daltrey and Pete Townshend. 234
11. Eric Clapton as The Preacher who offers 'Eyesight to the Blind'. 234
12. Colm Wilkinson and Christopher Neil as Judas and Jesus in the Palace Theatre production. *Jesus Christ Superstar* Souvenir Brochure and Libretto, 1974. 265
13. Judas, resurrected, sings 'Superstar' with the chorus of angels. *Jesus Christ Superstar* Souvenir Brochure and Libretto, 1974. 265
14. Christopher Neil in the Crucifixion scene. *Jesus Christ Superstar* Souvenir Brochure and Libretto, 1974. 266
15. The *Hair* company on the steps of St. Paul's Cathedral, December 1971. Martin Sullivan, *Watch How You Go* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1975), facing page 193. 266

# CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

### 1.1 'Strange thing, mystifying': The 'Rock Opera' genre

This thesis uses a theatrical and musical phenomenon – the 'Rock Opera' – as a means by which to examine the cultural, social and political history of Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. The Rock Opera – here defined as a historically-specific sub-genre of works consisting primarily of *Hair* (1967) by Gerome Ragni, James Rado and Galt MacDermot; *Tommy* (1969) by Pete Townshend and The Who; *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970) by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, and *Godspell* (1971) by John-Michael Tebelak and Stephen Schwartz – has received scant attention in the extensive and ever-expanding historiography of Britain during the 1960s and 1970s. The Rock Opera has likewise been ignored or dismissed with fleeting, amused contempt by the burgeoning fields of theatre and pop-rock music history. The absence is particularly striking given the genre's substantial commercial success and theatrical dominance. The long-playing recordings (LPs) of the four Rock Operas sold in large quantities and *Hair* blazed a theatrical trail that saw the Rock Opera overpower the major stages of the Western world, including London's theatrical West End.

Only two of the four Rock Operas – *Tommy* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* – are true 'operas' (in the style of the nineteenth century and beyond), being without spoken dialogue, 'through-composed' and, therefore, entirely 'sung-through'. One, *Tommy*, was not given a full-scale, long-running theatrical staging until 1993. All four utilized, however, the instrumentation, amplification and musical vocabulary of pop-rock music to dramatic effect by augmenting or supplanting the traditional orchestra of the theatre pit. This was groundbreaking. Above all, the Rock Opera genre combined the broad spectrum of the pop-rock music of the day with the novel techniques and forms of what was considered to be 'experimental' or 'fringe' theatre. *Hair* was the first theatre piece ever to transfer from the 'experimental' 'fringe' of a New York 'Off-Broadway' venue to the epicentres of American and British commercial theatre: Broadway and the West End. *Godspell* quickly followed. As a result, the Rock Opera brought both the tropes of rock



music and the working ethos of 'experimental' theatre firmly into the theatrical mainstream.

The 'references to legitimate culture' within the genre place it in the category of 'middlebrow' culture, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu: Rock Operas can be read as 'accessible version[s] of avant-garde experiments or accessible works which pass for avant-garde experiments' due to their combination of 'two normally exclusive characteristics, immediate accessibility and the outward signs of cultural legitimacy.'<sup>1</sup> This 'sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated' has, however, rendered them problematic 'for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture'.<sup>2</sup> As Chapters Two, Four and Six consider, enduring 'opposition between the "authentic" and the "imitation", "true" culture and "popularization"' have contributed to neglect of the genre.<sup>3</sup>

This thesis is informed by Bourdieu's observation that such

opposition between the 'commercial' and the 'non-commercial' ... is the generative principle of most of the judgements which ... claim to establish the frontier between what is and what is not art.<sup>4</sup>

Equally significantly, however, it will confirm that 'the characteristics of the cultural enterprise, understood as a more or less disavowed relation to the commercial enterprise, are inseparable.'<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the producers of the Rock Operas both embraced and redefined the scale of commercial theatrical enterprises. With *Hair* leading the way, the genre established a form of global musical-theatrical 'franchising' during the late 1960s and early 1970s which was further developed in the 1980s and afterwards by such commercial theatre behemoths as *Cats*, *Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Misérables*. Contemporary theatrical settings and use of demotic speech in the Rock Operas marked, however, a profound departure from the prevailing artistic norms – and, to a considerable extent, the

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu (translated by Richard Nice), *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p.323.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.56-7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.250.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu (translated by Richard Nice), 'The Production of Belief: Contributions to an Economy of Symbolic Goods', Randal Johnson (ed.), *The Field of Cultural Production*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p.82.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.82.

subsequent norms – of the wider genre of British and North American Musical Theatre.

Commercial success within the live theatre and recording industries was extended to the medium of film when *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* were released in 1973. *Tommy* was given a characteristically flamboyant treatment by director Ken Russell in 1975. *Hair* finally reached the screen (in a less financially and artistically successful manner than *Tommy* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*) in 1979. *Tommy* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* were particularly commercially successful and critically acclaimed as films, but all four Rock Operas drew substantial audiences to cinemas, as well as theatres, across Europe, North America and Australasia.<sup>6</sup>

The Rock Operas had, moreover, a broader significance. They also offer a window through which to examine the place of faith in Western societies after 1945. While *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* are based upon Christian scripture and, controversially at the time of their premieres, portray Christ on stage, all four works can and have been interpreted as narratives of spiritual quest presented through messianic allegory. *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* notably omit the Resurrection, but *Tommy* and *Hair*, neither based upon the Gospels, offer the hope of a form of life after death. Claude, the hero of *Hair*, reappears (unseen by the rest of the cast) after his death in the jungles of Vietnam, while the eponymous Tommy is symbolically ‘reborn’ through liberation from his deaf-mute and blind state.

All four works eschew the dominant boy-meets-girl, fantastical romantic narratives so prevalent within musical theatre, focusing instead on the existential, interior journeys of their central, messianic male characters. They substantially enhance, therefore, within a genre that had ‘long been dominated by female performers (and male creators)’, the ‘increased emphasis on the production of *male* interiority’ identified by David Savran as characteristic of ‘the postwar “integrated” musical’,

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<sup>6</sup> All four are available on Digital Video Disc (DVD): *Hair*, director Miloš Forman, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Home Entertainment 16180DVD MZ1; *Godspell*, director David Greene, Columbia Pictures DVD 22419; *Tommy The Movie, 2-Disc Collector’s Edition*, director Ken Russell, Odyssey Quest DVD ODX20290; *Jesus Christ Superstar*, director Norman Jewison, Universal Pictures DVD 823 297 5.

but do so through the overtly masculine – indeed ‘macho’ – tropes and ideology of ‘rock’.<sup>7</sup> These novel portrayals of masculinity within the *milieu* of musical theatre facilitate the uniting dramatic theme of the four Rock Operas: the historically-specific desire for re-defined forms of belief and religious faith. The urge to re-evaluate and re-formulate issues of personal morality – chiefly amongst young people associated with the so-called ‘counter-culture’ of the late 1960s – in the midst of the apparently contradictory and precipitous ‘secularization’ and ‘de-Christianization’ of British society in the decade after the publication of *Honest to God* by John Robinson, the Bishop of Woolwich, in 1963, is considered in Chapter Twelve.<sup>8</sup>

Between *Jesus Christ Superstar* opening on 9 August 1972 and *Hair* closing on 30 July 1973, they played, alongside *Godspell*, in major West End theatres. All three shows sharply divided critics, the (often self-defined) counter-cultural avant-garde, and organized religion. Nonetheless, the three London productions set several historic precedents in the West End. As is addressed in Chapter Four, *Hair* was the last play-script to be refused a licence for performance by the Lord Chamberlain prior to his statutory duty of pre-censorship of theatre scripts – which his office had exercised since the Licensing Act of 1737 – being removed by the Theatres Act of 1968. Opening on 27 September 1968, one day after the Theatres Act came into force, the London production of *Hair* became, by 1973, the longest-running of the many around the world. The three-year London run of *Godspell* was, by the standards of the day, a major success. The London production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* ran from 1972 until 1980, making it the then longest-running musical in the history of the West End.

The cultural historian Arthur Marwick was in no doubt that, despite their mainstream appeal and commercial success, the Rock Operas were, in their conception and execution, a hybrid off-spring of creative cross-fertilization between the experimental theatre and rock music cultures. Marwick correctly

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<sup>7</sup> David Savran, ‘Toward a Historiography of the Popular’, *Theatre Survey* 45:2 (November 2004), p.216. Emphasis in original.

<sup>8</sup> John A.T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963).

identified that, through its enthusiastic embrace of music and dance, 'experimental theatre was the embodiment of cross-over in all senses of that term', while 'the cross-over with popular music was strongly represented in the rock musical *Tommy*'. Indeed, Marwick considered that, in the pantheon of key cultural texts of the entire 'Sixties', 'a central document is the musical *Hair*'.<sup>9</sup> He neglected, however, fully to explain why. The over-arching objective of this thesis is to answer that question through a detailed analysis of the production and reception of the four Rock Operas. In so doing, it reveals them as unjustly neglected, highly informative cultural and historical texts.

The thesis therefore contributes to a necessary rebalancing highlighted by Savran, whereby the 'popular-theatre traditions of the past century' which 'have held millions spellbound' have 'been routinely dismissed by scholars.'<sup>10</sup> As Chapter Four will address, 'until very recently ... historians and critics of twentieth-century theatre have obstinately (if inadvertently) endorsed the binary opposition between highbrow and lowbrow'; thus 'privileging elitist, modernist, and avant-gardist forms at the expense of those deemed merely and regrettably popular.'<sup>11</sup> Musical theatre has frequently been dismissed as the epitome of the 'middlebrow' which, by remaining 'too scandalously intimate with mass culture', has often been derided as 'the most loathed category' of theatrical production.<sup>12</sup>

This thesis redresses the 'near erasure from the standard histories' of the Rock Opera sub-genre of the musical, but does so not in the manner which Savran has also criticized for focusing 'narrowly and myopically on musical theatre.'<sup>13</sup> Rather, the textual content of the four works and the contextual circumstances of their initial production and reception, particularly in London, form the central, four-pronged case-study through which this thesis examines and sheds new light upon the cultural, political and social changes that are widely assumed to have characterized the 'mythic' 'Sixties' in Britain.

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<sup>9</sup> Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, 1958-74* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.357.

<sup>10</sup> Savran, 'Toward', *Theatre Survey*, p.212.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.212.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.213-4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.212.

The thesis embraces, however, Savran's assertion that satisfactory analysis of musical theatre must be interdisciplinary in nature, because

no form of Western theatre (with the possible exception of opera) uses as many different media to produce a totality that is always far more than the sum of its parts. As a result, analysis requires an implicit or explicit theorization of multiple ... systems of signification as well as at least passing familiarity with musicology.<sup>14</sup>

The point of historic juncture in the development of 'pop' music into 'rock' music (as considered in Chapter Two) makes musical analysis doubly necessary in order to understand the form and significance of the Rock Operas. For these reasons, Chapters Seven, Nine and Eleven address some of the compositional techniques deployed by Schwarz, in his eclectic score for *Godspell*; Townshend, as he strove towards an increasingly developed and learned musical style in *Tommy*; and Lloyd Webber, who achieved the most fully-realized musical integration of 'rock' and 'opera' in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Townshend, the sole composer of the four works with no formal training yet the one most receptive to the 'highbrow' tastes and cultural capital possessed by and revealed to him by his middle-class manager and mentor Kit Lambert, merits particular examination. Through such interdisciplinary scrutiny of the texts, production and reception of the Rock Operas in Britain, this thesis aims to open what Marwick, Anthony Aldgate and James Chapman described, in their eponymously titled volume, as new 'windows on the Sixties'.<sup>15</sup>

While *Tommy* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* were created by Englishmen, *Hair* and *Godspell* were of North American origin. That the teams of authors worked independently, yet all four works became hugely successful on both sides of the Atlantic, gives further insight into the fruitful, reciprocal transatlantic exchange of 'Pop' culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Interrogation of the Rock Operas offers particularly revealing new insights into both the 'counter-culture' and the 'mainstream' against which it defined and contrasted itself. What has become known as the counter-culture was a range of oppositional, societal forces

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp.215-6.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Aldgate, James Chapman and Arthur Marwick (eds.) *Windows on the Sixties: Exploring Key Texts of Media and Culture* (London: I. B. Taurus & Co. Ltd, 2000).

throughout the West from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. This term has come to encapsulate all behaviour – predominantly, but not exclusively, amongst the newly-affluent social category of ‘youth’ – that sought to alter radically or to overthrow the *status quo*. This thesis therefore analyses the four Rock Operas as significant prisms through which to view many of the profound societal debates – over ‘faith’ and ‘belief’ in the widest senses, drugs and ‘spiritual enlightenment’, the Vietnam war, sexuality, generational conflict, and race – which were, to some considerable extent, elevated onto the political agenda by the activities of the broadly-defined counter-culture (which is also sometimes referred to as ‘the underground’ or ‘the psychedelic movement’).

Theatrically and musically innovative, often controversial, and spectacularly commercially successful, *Hair*, *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* brought to the major stages of London and the Western world many of the concerns and aspirations of the counter-cultural agenda. They were rewarded, however, with the ongoing derision of the self-defined leaders of the English counter-culture. Jonathon Green, a regular contributor to such leading periodicals of the English ‘underground’ press of the late 1960s and early 1970s as *International Times (IT)*, *Oz*, *Time Out* and *Friends* has, for example, dismissed *Hair* as politically and artistically ‘execrable’.<sup>16</sup> In Bourdieu’s schema, such rejection is rationalized as a matter of ‘taste’; which is a ‘practical affirmation of an inevitable difference’ in which ‘all determination is negation’. Only *Tommy* – uniquely amongst the Rock Operas the creation of an existing, already commercially successful rock band – escaped such disparagement. The overwhelmingly negative responses to the Rock Opera genre from leading spokespersons for the counter-culture are therefore considered as examples that ‘tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes.’<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jonathon Green, *All Dressed Up: The Sixties and the Counterculture* (London: Pimlico, 1999), p.343.

<sup>17</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p.56.

## 1.2 The historiography of 'The Sixties'

The enduring legacy of 'The Sixties' in Britain is vigorously contested within a historiographic field which includes academically rigorous surveys; popular histories; polemical denunciations of the period from the political right and a plethora of accounts and memoirs from the self-identified leaders of the English counter-culture.<sup>18</sup> Mark Donnelly has provided a masterful overview of this historiography.<sup>19</sup> His conceptualization of the period underpins this thesis, as does his observation that 'the debate about the legacy of the sixties has long been overheated, with the result that the ambiguities and complexities ... have too often disappeared from view'.<sup>20</sup> He describes 'sixties Britain', accurately, as a concept which has been 'heavily edited' and 'reworked', and which, as 'a composite part of the wider international phenomenon of "the sixties"', is 'saturated in symbolism, meanings and myth'.<sup>21</sup>

This thesis focuses primarily on the cultural practices and values of the young: the post-war 'baby boom' generation who reached adulthood in Britain during the 1960s and around whom 'the modern consumer economy' coalesced, 'reaching across the social and generational divides as never before and transforming popular culture in the process'.<sup>22</sup> Donnelly has contrasted the harsh economic climate endured by Britons prior to and during the Second World War with the 'outlook ... and expectations' of the post-1945 generation, who would 'show themselves to be less like their parents than any previous generation in modern times' and 'more likely to have unrestrained appetites'. He has identified the emergence of 'a "now" mentality' which 'developed as the young calculated that postponing pleasure as their parents had done was a pointless trade, not least as there was a declining faith in the promise of an afterlife'.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Examples include Shawn Levy, *Ready, Steady, Go! – The Smashing Rise and Giddy Fall of Swinging London* (New York: Doubleday, 2002); Peter Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain: The British Cultural Revolution from Lady Chatterley to Tony Blair* (London: Quartet Books, 1999); Richard Neville, *Play Power: Exploring the International Underground* (Random House: New York, 1970).

<sup>19</sup> Mark Donnelly, *Sixties Britain: culture, society and politics* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2005), pp.1-14.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xii.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xiv.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.1-2.

That 'now' mentality was enabled by the unprecedented social and economic safety-net of the Welfare State and National Health Service established by the Attlee Labour governments of 1945-51. Moreover, as post-war austerity gradually gave way, under the Conservative governments of 1951-64, to what Dominic Sandbrook has called

a palpable sense of optimism ... increasingly, the attention of the nation and its leaders would be fixed on domestic matters: on making and spending money, on families and jobs, on television and films, on pleasure and affluence.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, the very 'nature of capitalism changed in the post-war era', with a new

emphasis on the needs of consumption (in other words spending) rather than production (which required saving and investment). In consequence came a culture across the west that repeatedly privileged hedonism over self-discipline, play over work and sexual gratification over restraint.<sup>25</sup>

Central to any consideration of the cultural history of Britain during the period are the changes in what was legally permissible in the arena of sexual gratification and representation and the accompanying profound debates within the public sphere. Campaigns for reform of laws relating to homosexuality, abortion, divorce, the death penalty and censorship of the theatrical stage had long predated the election of Harold Wilson's Labour governments of 1964–70. Nonetheless, the 'permissive' legislation of the decade, often authored by individual Members of Parliament as Private Members' Bills but associated chiefly with Wilson's second Home Secretary Roy Jenkins (and less so Jenkins' successor from 1967, James Callaghan) represented an extraordinary investment of political capital on the part of the Labour government. The 1967 Abortion and Sexual Offences Acts, the Theatres Act of 1968 and the 1969 Divorce Reform Act, to name but four, were part of a programme of liberalization which marked a historic juncture in British society. Practices which had hitherto been considered both immoral and illegal – such as the medical termination of pregnancy (in mainland Britain) and sexual relations in private between males over the age of

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<sup>24</sup> Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: a History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London: Little, Brown, 2005), p.49.

<sup>25</sup> Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, pp.1-2.



21 (in England and Wales) – were now permissible by law.<sup>26</sup> This, in an era of declining church membership and attendance, further ‘undermined long-held assumptions about the relevance of a moral code that was derived from Christianity’.<sup>27</sup>

Only a minority of the British population chose to avail themselves of the new permissions granted to them during the ‘liberal hour’ of ‘the Jenkins reforms’: by no means everyone needed or wanted to. It is equally important to note, however, that everyone to whom the new legislation applied could now – legally – do so. This new permissiveness is central to what Arthur Marwick and others have called the ‘cultural revolution’ of ‘The Sixties’. Culture, for Marwick, referred to ‘the network, or totality, of attitudes, values and practices of a particular group of human beings’.<sup>28</sup> Marwick was equally careful to define the meaning of ‘cultural revolution’, and to acknowledge that ‘perhaps it is not a terribly good term. One problem is that the phrase ... already exists to describe the policies initiated in China by Mao Tse-tung in 1965’. Marwick explained, however, that he had

a very different kind of ‘cultural revolution’ in mind ... In the Sixties in the West nothing had taken place that theorists of revolution would recognise as revolution (many of them had placed high hopes in the student activism and widespread strikes of 1968, but in the end these had fizzled out, with existing governments generally being confirmed in power). There was no political revolution, no economic revolution.

In the conditions of ‘everyday life’ and ‘in ideas and values’, however, Marwick considers ‘the phrase “*cultural* revolution” ... appropriate’ as ‘a kind of shorthand’.<sup>29</sup>

The term is, however, ‘contentious’, as Marwick was well aware:

From the left it is contended that no fundamental shifts in the structure of power, no serious attacks on the deprivations suffered by substantial

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<sup>26</sup> On the political processes by which these Acts became law see Andrew James Holden, *Letting the Wolf through the Door: Public Morality, Politics and ‘Permissive’ Reform under the Wilson Governments, 1964-1970* (PhD thesis, Queen Mary, University of London, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, p.xiiv.

<sup>28</sup> Arthur Marwick (ed.), *An Introduction to the Humanities – The Sixties: Mainstream Culture and Counter-Culture* (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 1998), p.16.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.21-22. Emphasis in original.

minorities, took place, and that those features of sixties culture which hit the headlines were shallow, commercial and sexist.<sup>30</sup>

Nonetheless, his conclusion that ‘a transformation in the *opportunities* and freedoms *available* both to the majority as a whole and to distinctive individuals and groups within that majority’ is valid.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Marwick further refined the term ‘cultural revolution’ through a ‘sixteen-point conceptualization’ in his monumental work, *The Sixties*. Donnelly – with the proviso that ‘the effects ... were uneven, with the impact varying across boundaries of class, gender, generation, region and ethnicity’ – has summarised these elements, all of which enabled or were expressed by the Rock Opera genre:

The sixties saw the formation of new subcultures and movements, generally critical of, or in opposition to, established society; an outburst of entrepreneurialism, individualism, doing your own thing; the rise to positions of unprecedented influence of young people; important advances in technology; the advent of ‘spectacle’ as an integral part of the interface between life and leisure; unprecedented international cultural exchange; upheavals in class, race and family relationships; general sexual liberation; new modes of self-presentation; a vibrant popular culture; striking developments in elite thought; the expansion of a liberal, progressive presence within the institutions of authority; the continued existence of elements of extreme reaction ... new concerns for civil and personal rights; and the first intimations of the challenges and opportunities presented by multiculturalism.<sup>32</sup>

Sandbrook has challenged the concept of ‘the alleged cultural revolution’ which ‘Marwick used to bang on excitedly about’.<sup>33</sup> He has also noted, accurately, that ‘many people complained that the social and cultural changes of the sixties were creating a society of materialism, alienation and immorality’.<sup>34</sup> Some have since accepted the existence of a ‘cultural revolution’ only to identify within it a disastrous nodal point in the history of British society. Margaret Thatcher declared in 1982 that ‘we are reaping what was sown in the Sixties’, when ‘fashionable theories and permissive claptrap set the scene for a society in which

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<sup>30</sup> Arthur Marwick, *Culture in Britain since 1945* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1991), p.67.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.68. Emphasis added.

<sup>32</sup> Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, pp.xiii,11.

<sup>33</sup> Sandbrook, *Never Had*, p.xxv; *Literary Review*, May 2008.

<sup>34</sup> Dominic Sandbrook, *White Heat: a History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties* (London: Little, Brown, 2006). p.xvii.

the old virtues of discipline and restraint were denigrated'.<sup>35</sup> Her political lieutenant Norman Tebbit spoke of 'the insufferable, smug, sanctimonious, naive, guilt-ridden, wet, pink orthodoxy of ... that third-rate decade'.<sup>36</sup> In the twenty-first century, Tony Blair called for an end to 'the 1960s liberal consensus' on law and order under which, he believed, 'some took the freedom without the responsibility'.<sup>37</sup>

In a similar vein, journalist Peter Hitchens holds that

in the 1960s we chose the wrong future, and we're still living with that ... People were fooled – and have been consistently fooled – that by taking part in the 1960s rebellion against the old culture they were freeing themselves ... People began to mistake pleasure for happiness and ... thought that immediate satisfaction was more important than ... longer-term goals. That was the thing that really changed; it was the triumph of hedonism.

Hitchens' fellow darling of the right-wing British press, Simon Heffer, concurs that 'it was a decade of decay; decline; cheap and nasty; of the replacement of reality by illusion'.<sup>38</sup> Heffer echoes Christopher Booker who, in 1969, stated that Britain had recently indulged in 'a collective fantasy'. In quasi-psychoanalytical terms peppered with the vocabulary of contagion, Booker declared that 'no breeding ground for fantasy is so fertile as a society in a state of disintegration and flux'. Such a state made Britain 'uniquely vulnerable' to 'new forces making for disintegration.' In Booker's 'model of what happened to England in the Fifties and Sixties, the collective fantasy of society' became 'so excited that all sorts of different streams of infection' ran 'together to form a psychic epidemic'. He foresaw that 'the natural mutual attraction of one form of fantasy for another will reach the point where a whole range of group-fantasies can find common cause, merging into one general collective sickness'.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Margaret Thatcher, speech to Conservative Central Council, 27/03/1982, <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104905> (accessed 15/04/2009).

<sup>36</sup> Norman Tebbit, speech at Oxford University, 22/02/1990, cited in Bart Moore-Gilbert and John Seed (eds.), *Cultural Revolution? The Challenge of the Arts in the 1960s* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.2.

<sup>37</sup> *The Independent*, 19/07/2004.

<sup>38</sup> *Why I Hate The Sixties: the Decade That Was Too Good To Be True*, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Four television, first broadcast 12/06/2004.

<sup>39</sup> Christopher Booker, *The Neophiliacs: a Study of the Revolution in English Life in the Fifties and Sixties* (London: Collins, 1969), pp.80, 314.

As Donnelly has observed, however, ‘categorising decades into “good” or “bad” ones is an irrelevance’.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, ongoing, febrile historiographic debate ‘makes the sixties special’ because

as *an entity* they attract more attention than any comparable decade. They have become a totem, something that people are either ‘for’ or ‘against’. They are the historical equivalent of a brand identity, representing a set of meanings, values and attitudes ... to be fought over.<sup>41</sup>

The period of time encapsulated by the concept ‘The Sixties’ is equally contentious: that the works cited thus far posit dates ranging between 1955 and 1975 as beginning and end points – with many points of sub-demarcation in between – is a reminder that ‘periodization is simply an analytical device of historians’.<sup>42</sup> This thesis identifies no significant cultural or political rupture in 1970 (notwithstanding the election of Edward Heath’s Conservative government of 1970-74). Rather, continuity of the cultural concerns raised by the Rock Opera genre confirms Germaine Greer’s assessment that ‘most of the things people think happened in the Sixties didn’t happen until the Seventies’.<sup>43</sup> ‘Underground’ journalist and singer with The Deviants Mick Farren has, likewise, stated that much activity ‘credited to the Sixties didn’t really come to fruition until ’72 or ’73’, while Donnelly has observed that ‘many manifestations of sixties change – the Women’s Liberation Movement, gay rights activism, the post-material politics of the ecology movement – only became prominent in the 1970s’.<sup>44</sup> This thesis therefore addresses the period between the emergence to public prominence of the English ‘underground’ at the International Poetry Incarnation in London in 1965, and the release of the movie of *Tommy* in 1975.

This thesis is not a history of the United Kingdom between 1965 and 1975. It focuses predominantly on London, as the primary location of the English counter-culture and home of the British entertainment industries. As Donnelly has noted,

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<sup>40</sup> Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, p.xii.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3. Emphasis in original.

<sup>42</sup> Marwick, *An Introduction*, p.12.

<sup>43</sup> *Newsnight Review*, BBC2 Television, first broadcast 01/08/2008.

<sup>44</sup> Mick Farren, *Give the Anarchist a Cigarette*, (London: Jonathon Cape, 2001), p.234; Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, p.xv. See also Adam Lent, *British Social Movements since 1945: Sex, Colour, Peace and Power* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

it is within those entertainment industries that the legacy of 'The Sixties' has perhaps proved most tenacious: in the decades since, 'the semiotics ... the fashions, the music, the flower-power aesthetic, have never been far from the surface of contemporary culture'.<sup>45</sup> One such example is the trilogy of American-produced *Austin Powers* movies which were successful worldwide from 1997. The humour of the first film hinges entirely upon both a recognition of and affection for many of the reductive 'myths' and semiotics of the 'Swinging London' moment which *Time* magazine – in its celebration of the fashions of Carnaby Street; British pop music; the Mini car and the Mary Quant-designed mini-skirt – first crystallized in 1966.<sup>46</sup> The interface between the cultural and 'counter-cultural' practices of the young within that allegedly 'swinging' city in the subsequent decade is a primary concern of this thesis.

### 1.3 The counter-culture and the 'Counter-Culturalists'

The cultural historian Robert Hewison has made a convincing case for viewing the English counter-culture as an amorphous coalition which exemplified Bourdieu's wider observation that all 'activities grouped under the term counter-culture' must, by definition, 'merely contest one culture in the name of another', and are therefore better understood as fulfilling 'the traditional roles of a cultural avant-garde'.<sup>47</sup> Hewison has also mapped, meticulously, the variations in ideological and creative motivations within and between the disparate but over-lapping elements of the English counter-culture. Jim Haynes, co-founder of *IT* and London's Arts Lab, however, perceived only one major counter-cultural division, into

two distinct wings. The political wing wanted to bring about some kind of Marxist revolution ... And then there was another wing, which was the one I was interested in. It said 'live now, your revolution. You don't have to ask permission of anybody. Live the way you want to live. Do it now'.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, p.3.

<sup>46</sup> *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (Jay Roach, 1997); *Time*, 15/04/1966.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Hewison, *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties, 1960-75* (London: Methuen, 1986); Bourdieu *Distinction*, p.251.

<sup>48</sup> *Notes from the Underground*, written and presented by Rosie Boycott, BBC Radio Four, first broadcast 03/04/2008.

Sue Miles has likewise distinguished between Marxist ‘theoreticals’ like ‘the *New Left Review* mob’ and those more preoccupied with the culturally creative spheres of theatre, poetry, publishing, visual art and music.<sup>49</sup> The latter are of greater concern within this thesis. Indeed, while their accompanying agenda of sexual permissiveness led *Oz* magazine to dub them ‘the libidinal left’, it is largely unhelpful to consider this more ludic, ‘hippy’ wing of the counter-culture to be of ‘the Left’: libertarianism, not Marxism, was their defining article of faith.<sup>50</sup> As Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones concurred in a 1967 television interview which sought, in the wake of his overturned conviction for drug possession, to understand the motivations of the counter-cultural young, ‘a certain intensity of living’ and ‘to have as good a time as possible’ figured more prominently in their unwritten constitution than political revolution.<sup>51</sup> Mick Farren has, likewise, confirmed that ‘we hippies of the Sixties paid far too much attention to style and almost none to political theory’.<sup>52</sup>

Theodore Roszak, the first scholar to investigate the transatlantic counter-culture, noted sagely in 1968 that ‘as a subject of study’ it

possesses all the liabilities which a decent sense of intellectual caution would persuade one to avoid ... It would surely be convenient if these perversely ectoplasmic *Zeitgeists* were card-carrying movements, with a headquarters, an executive board, and a file of official manifestoes. But of course they aren’t.<sup>53</sup>

In 1967, however, John McGrath, editor of *IT*, had synthesized a manifesto. This developed upon themes outlined in 1964 by Alexander Trocchi in *The Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds* and *Sigma, a Tactical Blueprint*.<sup>54</sup> McGrath’s informative *IT* editorial describes ‘an inner-directed movement’ which shares ‘a common viewpoint – a new way of looking at things – rather than a credo, dogma or ideology’. It was ‘impossible to define this new attitude: you either have it or

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<sup>49</sup> Cited in Jonathon Green, *Days in the Life: Voices from the English Underground 1961-1971* (London: Heinemann, 1988) p.55.

<sup>50</sup> *Oz* number 40, February 1972.

<sup>51</sup> *World In Action*, Granada Television, first broadcast on the Independent Television (ITV) network 31/07/1967.

<sup>52</sup> Farren, *Give the Anarchist*, p.69.

<sup>53</sup> Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflection on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p.xi.

<sup>54</sup> Cited in Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture* (London: Palladin, 1970), pp.156-9.

you don't'. McGrath, however, notes 'some of its manifestations', most significantly

Permissiveness – the individual should be free from hindrance by external or internal guilt in his pursuit of pleasure so long as he does not impinge on others ... The search for pleasure/orgasm covers every field of human activity from sex, art and inner space, to architecture [and] the abolition of money.<sup>55</sup>

The counter-culture was, for McGrath, 'post/anti-political': 'not a movement of protest but one of celebration'. Indeed, 'even to call it a new "movement"' created 'a false impression' because 'there are no leaders'. Rather, 'this new thing is just people coming together and grooving. If you don't know what grooving means then you haven't yet understood what is going on'. He explained that 'grooving' referred to 'a happy view of man and his potential, based mainly on his creativity' and the 'ease' of being 'international, inter-racial', 'equisexual' and 'post-existential'. 'Optimism ... reborn in the face of the H-bomb, Vietnam, poverty, hunger, etc., is so surprising it is almost a miracle'.<sup>56</sup> 'Love and creativity' expressed through 'wild new clothes fashions' and 'strange new music sounds' were 'the new approach'. Also, notably,

the new movement ... know[s] how to use the media to strongest advantage. In an instant-communication age, any act anywhere can be given world wide significance if your communication link-up is efficient enough. This is one aspect of what *IT* and the Underground Press Syndicate is all about.

Through these means, 'the new movement' was 'slowly, carelessly, constructing an alternative society'.<sup>57</sup>

Illegal drugs were another unifying factor. The use of amphetamine stimulants and hallucinogens, particularly lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), was a minority pursuit even within counter-cultural circles, but being a 'head' or 'freak' who got 'stoned' by smoking 'joints' of marijuana, cannabis or hashish (or 'grass', 'pot' or 'hash') was *de rigueur*. As Barry Miles stated in a discussion at London's

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<sup>55</sup> *International Times*, number 10, 13-26/03/1967.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. Nuttal's *Bomb Culture* of 1968 similarly 'defined the emergent ethos in terms of the ever-present threat of nuclear annihilation' and, in Farren's opinion, 'made a staggering contribution to the currency of ideas in the Sixties'. Farren, *Give the Anarchist*, p.59.

<sup>57</sup> *International Times*, number 10, 13-26/03/1967.

Whitechapel Gallery in 2005, the counter-culture was predicated upon the use of cannabis as a quasi-sacramental intoxicant; a means of economic exchange, and an illegal pursuit which bound all participants in a culture of 'oppositional' behaviour.

Marijuana smoke is much in evidence in Peter Whitehead's film – significantly entitled *Wholly Communion* – of the International Poetry Incarnation held at the Royal Albert Hall on 11 June 1965; an event 'which both contemporary commentators and current Sixties historians cite as the genesis of the counter-culture in England'.<sup>58</sup> Alex Trocchi and John McGrath hosted the poetry reading in which such Britons as Adrian Mitchell and Harry Fainlight appeared alongside what Rosie Boycott has called 'the shining lights of the American Beat Generation', including Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti.<sup>59</sup> A capacity audience of 7,000 attended. This 'graphic demonstration that so many were ... interested in cutting-edge poetry and inspired weirdness' confirmed that there was a market for an 'underground' press.<sup>60</sup> Green has noted, however, that this term is, in fact, a misnomer as 'the word "underground" implies "hidden"'. 'By the time you get to launch underground papers ... you are getting what one could call "alternative society": a parallel world, a parallel economy'.<sup>61</sup>

The first and most significant of London's 'underground' papers, *International Times*, was launched at the Round House in Camden on 14 October 1966.<sup>62</sup> This was another event which has come to be seen as a bench-mark of counter-cultural history: with the favoured new band of the alternative scene Pink Floyd performing, those in attendance formed, 'in that context', a 'sort of 'Who's Who' of the underground scene'.<sup>63</sup> The '14 Hour Technicolor Dream', a 'giant benefit against fuzz [police] action' and to raise money for *IT*, was held at Alexandra

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<sup>58</sup> *Wholly Communion* (directed by Peter Whitehead), Lorrimer Films Ltd., 1965; Farren, *Give the Anarchist*, p.59.

<sup>59</sup> *Notes*, BBC Radio Four.

<sup>60</sup> Farren, *Give the Anarchist*, p.60; *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Notes*, BBC Radio Four.

<sup>62</sup> On the history of the underground press, see Elizabeth Nelson, *The British Counter-Culture 1966-73: A Study of the Underground Press* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989); Nigel Fountain, *The London Alternative Press 1966-74* (London: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>63</sup> Joe Boyd, interviewed in *Notes*, BBC Radio Four.



Palace on 29 April 1967. Attended by Beatle John Lennon, and featuring a huge roster of counter-cultural groups and artists (including Yoko Ono), this event attracted television news coverage and is another canonical event in counter-cultural memoirs.<sup>64</sup> The leading lights of the new movement could also be found 'hanging out in the Arts Lab, a conveniently neutral space where you could chat to friendly people, watch weird underground avant-garde films, look at exhibitions and eat a cheap meal' and at other 'counter-culture centres' in London: 'clubs like UFO, Middle Earth and the Marquee'.<sup>65</sup>

Another key location was Indica, a bookshop and gallery opened in 1965 by John Dunbar (then married to pop singer Marianne Faithfull) and Barry Miles with financial input from Peter Asher. Asher was the brother of actress Jane, who was the girlfriend of Beatle Paul McCartney. Indica, in which *IT* was first housed, became, like its predecessor Better Books at which Miles had worked, a place to 'hang out': and therein lies the challenge of separating the wheat from the chaff of the memoirs of those who will hereafter be referred to as the Counter-Culturalists. Their cataloguing of the minutiae of who knew who; who shared flats or beds; who took which drugs together at which parties or 'happenings' and in which locales supports Marwick's conclusion that investigation of 'The Sixties' can easily be 'obscured by the attention lavished on the minority practices of "underground culture"'.<sup>66</sup>

Marianne Faithfull's ghost-written autobiography offers numerous such anecdotes, yet she casts a more healthily cynical eye than most over the activities of her subset of the counter-culture. She conveys the desire for experimentation and libertarianism and the combination of bourgeois rebellion and drugs (often courtesy of the feckless minor aristocrats and well-to-do of 'the Chelsea set' which she identifies as the *jeunesse dorée*) which underpinned their actions. Refreshingly candid about her naïveté during the 1960s (even as she became,

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<sup>64</sup> Barry Miles, *In The Sixties*, (London: Jonathon Cape, 2002), p.181-5.

<sup>65</sup> Sheila Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream: Remembering the Sixties* (New York: Verso, 2001), p.168.

<sup>66</sup> Marwick, *Culture*, p.68.

from 1966, Mick Jagger's lover), she describes herself, in the early part of the decade, as 'a typical child of my time'. 'Open to everything', Faithfull was

being a teenager: curious, rebellious, in quest of the forbidden ... From my little girl's perspective, it was all connected to hipness. I was putting together a persona out of a lot of diverse elements. It was all unfocused ... there were only hazy intimations of what was coming [but] I was hellbent on being there when it happened - whatever it was!<sup>67</sup>

She stresses the serendipitous nature of what the Counter-Culturalists have since tended to portray as a rational, planned movement, and notes that

Sixties London actually has its own origin myth. All these people - gallery owners, photographers, pop stars, aristos and assorted talented layabouts - more or less invented the scene in London, so I guess I was present at the Creation. The Ur myth was concocted, rather typically, in an espresso bar in Chelsea ... Early in 1963, John [Dunbar] ... Paolo Leone, a left-wing beatnik type, and Barry Miles ... put their heads together and hatched a plot. I was just a young girl watching these mad intellectuals all dressed in existential black charting the future of the globe.

Faithfull records, with self-deprecating humour, that their manifesto was more succinct than John McGrath's: "It's going to be the psychic bloody centre of the world, man!"<sup>68</sup>

Faithfull, like Miles and Farren, does not offer an analytical history of 1960s Britain. Their autobiographical accounts are, merely, informative primary sources which need to be scrutinized critically. Counter-Culturalists such as Green, Miles and Rosie Boycott have, however, come to dominate the re-telling of the story of 'Sixties' Britain. Radio and television producers, who turn to them first as contributors to yet more documentary programmes on 'The Sixties', grant the Counter-Culturalists further opportunities to repeat their now finely-honed anecdotes. As a result, they often appear to be 'assuming some kind of proprietorship over how the decade should be represented'.<sup>69</sup> Publishers have also exploited the market for counter-cultural memoirs by, too often, claiming for them the status of definitive histories. The cover of Miles' account, for example, offers the potential buyer 'the real story of the 1960s counterculture, from the

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<sup>67</sup> Marianne Faithfull with David Dalton, *Faithfull* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994), p.21.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>69</sup> Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, p.4.

inside': as Donnelly has observed, however, 'no one can claim "ownership" of the sixties, implicitly or otherwise, nor can any writer hope to show "what really happened"' because 'there is no essential "oneness" to sixties Britain that can be recovered, whatever methods or sources are mobilized'.<sup>70</sup>

The Rock Opera case studies will add to the multiplicity of voices and perspectives through which a period of considerable cultural change is best understood. This thesis will consider why the Counter-Culturalists were and are so reluctant to support a genre which was profoundly informed by and highly representative of their concerns. That it brought out 'the counter-cultural' in many who created, performed, listened to and watched the four works suggests, therefore, a far wider constituency for the values of the counter-culture than the exclusivity of the Counter-Culturalists acknowledges. While self-identification with the counter-culture by individuals associated with the Rock Operas varied in intensity, their actions render their contribution to a period of cultural change as informative and valid as the Counter-Culturalists and as worthy of consideration within the wider historiography of 'Sixties' Britain.

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<sup>70</sup> Miles, *In The Sixties*; Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, pp.4-5.

## CHAPTER TWO

### From 'Pop' music to 'Rock' music, 1965-69

Together with Chapters Three and Four, this chapter sets the context in which the Rock Operas were born. They describe the theatrical world out of which Rock Operas came: this chapter sets the musical scene. Focusing on The Who, it examines the music industry at a point of historic juncture. This musical change enabled the Rock Opera genre, underpinned much counter-cultural activity, and reflected and informed the wider 'cultural revolution' of 'Sixties' Britain, both as it unfolded and as it has been understood since. Appreciating this economic and creative context is crucial to understanding the development and success of the Rock Operas.

The chapter considers the period between the release of The Who's first single 'I Can't Explain' in 1965 and the *Tommy* album in 1969. In this period, the music industry exceeded, in economic and creative terms, the 'spectacular development' seen in the late 1950s and during the rise to global fame of The Beatles in the first half of the 1960s. 'In 1955 British listeners bought just over 4 million 45-rpm singles a year; by 1960, they were buying 52 million; and by 1963, 61 million'.<sup>1</sup> By the mid-1970s 'the output of British record companies reached triple that of the mid-1950s' and music had become 'the most popular – and lucrative – form of entertainment in the USA'.<sup>2</sup> Simon Frith could, in the early 1980s, claim legitimately that 'Anglo-American mass music dominates the world more effectively than any other mass medium'.<sup>3</sup> That The Beatles sold, in 1996, 'more records than they managed in any year while they were still recording' confirms that the music of 'The Sixties' remained amongst the period's most pervasive cultural legacies.<sup>4</sup> This chapter, and Chapters Nine and Ten, will suggest that it was the process of transition from 'pop' to 'rock' as the dominant musical style – in which The Who played a central part – that made the Rock Opera possible, and

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<sup>1</sup> Sandbrook, *White Heat*, p.102. The seven-inch single record – containing one song on each side – played at 45 revolutions per minute; the twelve-inch LP at 33<sup>1/3</sup> rpm.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock* (London: Constable & Co., 1983), pp.4-5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>4</sup> Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, p.3.

secured the longevity of the musical forms and economies of scale established in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The early lives and career of The Who – guitarist Pete Townshend; singer Roger Daltrey; bass-guitarist John Entwistle and drummer Keith Moon – have been extensively chronicled.<sup>5</sup> There are, however, marked similarities with the early experiences of their slightly longer-established peer groups The Beatles and the Rolling Stones, as well as other significant British bands of the mid-to-late 1960s such as The Kinks and The Small Faces.<sup>6</sup> All of The Who were born between 1944 and 1946. As the jazz singer, artist and critic George Melly noted in 1970, ‘it was typical of what was changing in pop that, apart from their drummer, all The Who were ex-grammar school’ and that ‘their leading spirit’, Townshend, had, like Keith Richards of the Stones and Ray Davies of The Kinks, been an art student.<sup>7</sup> Townshend’s parents, like so many of their generation, were involved with the forces, albeit in an unusual capacity: his father was a saxophonist with The Royal Air Force Dance Orchestra (nicknamed ‘The Squadronaires’), through which he met Townshend’s mother, a swing-band singer.<sup>8</sup>

The Who cut their teeth on the pub and dance-hall circuit in their native London. In July 1964 they were taken on by the inexperienced but enthusiastic management team of Chris Stamp and Kit Lambert. As Chapter Nine will consider, the urbane Lambert was, for Townshend in particular, an important musical and cultural educator. His role was similar to the dual influences on the early Beatles of manager Brian Epstein and producer George Martin. Lambert and Stamp were enthused by their new musical charges but had little practice in the ways of the music industry. As a result, The Who, like many 1960s performers, entered into an early recording contract which rewarded others more handsomely than the band, and from which their management, at further expense, had to extricate them. Partly for financial reasons, therefore, the group’s

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Dave Marsh, *Before I Get Old: The Story of The Who* (London: Plexus, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> On the early careers of The Beatles and the Rolling Stones, whose first singles were released in October 1962 and June 1963, see Sandbrook, *Never Had*, pp.484-512 and *White Heat*, pp.133-135.

<sup>7</sup> George Melly, *Revolt Into Style: the Pop Arts in the 50s and 60s* (London: Allen Lane, 1970), p.115.

<sup>8</sup> Marsh, *Before*, p.15.

touring schedule, even after they achieved chart success, was punishing: they gave, for example, sixty performances in the first three months of 1966. The band – excluding Daltrey – frequently resorted to amphetamines chiefly to have the energy to play.<sup>9</sup>

Financial reward was therefore long in materializing, but specific contingencies within the music industry did offer immediate creative advantages for British groups as a result of

the economic situation of the record companies, effective employers of bands. Not only did they see the world market rapidly expanding, but the consumer boom in the UK yielded them large returns, enabling them to invest in their artists without requiring an immediate financial return ... and also to relinquish a degree of control over the resultant product and its marketing. This both enabled and encouraged artists to experiment with music which often was not immediately and widely accessible, and gave them a sense of control over their musical destinies.

Moreover, 'experimentation was further enabled by far-reaching technological developments in the studio'.<sup>10</sup> Multi-track recording, initially on four and, by the end of the decade, eight tracks became the industry norm. This transformed the recording studio into a laboratory: it allowed for the asynchronous layering or 'over-dubbing' of voices and instruments, largely replacing the previous practice of simply recording a band performing simultaneously.

The new possibilities of the recording studio were first fully realised by The Beatles in *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Released in June 1967, *Sgt. Pepper* developed upon traits first apparent on *Rubber Soul* (1965) and *Revolver* (1966), but was marked out by its deliberate alignment with what Allan Moore calls 'an unspecified, "hippie" position'. Eastern influences are expressed through the musical arrangement of 'Within You, Without You', and 'LSD-inspired imagery' permeates Lennon's 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds'. Moore stresses *Sgt. Pepper's* 'unity of concept', quoting McCartney to emphasize the marketing 'hype' which surrounded its launch: "the idea was to make a complete thing that you

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<sup>9</sup> *Amazing Journey – The Story of The Who* (Paul Crowder and Murray Lerner, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Allan F. Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text – Developing a Musicology of Rock* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p.65.

could make what you like of: a little magic presentation – a packet of things inside the record sleeve”. A further unifying factor ‘is that the whole album is clearly set within a non-musical context – an intentionally artificial attempt to create a live club setting, wherein the first song is reprised at the end.’<sup>11</sup>

*Sgt. Pepper* had been ‘heavily trailed in the British music press and was almost everywhere immediately accepted it as a cultural milestone. Critic Kenneth Tynan, for instance, went typically over the top in describing its release as “a decisive moment in the history of western civilization”’.<sup>12</sup> 2.5 million copies were sold within three months.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike *Tommy*, however, *Sgt. Pepper* does not have a narrative through-line. It is perhaps better considered not as the first ‘concept album’ but as the work which demonstrated the new artistic supremacy of the album over the single. ‘A new set of stylistic values appeared to have been set up’ which suggested that ‘pop’ music ‘had clearly overstepped the limitations of the seven-inch medium’.<sup>14</sup> Record-buyers agreed: in 1968, for the first time, sales of albums (which were more expensive and yielded higher profits) overtook those of singles.<sup>15</sup> This shift in the dominant format both stimulated and reflected what many music critics have identified as ‘an attendant shift in cultural legitimacy’.<sup>16</sup> After *Sgt. Pepper*, even the scope of the album could prove insufficient: the coming years would see double-albums, ‘triples, boxed sets, concept albums, tracks lasting a whole side, gatefold album sleeves, the album cover as “art”, groups working with orchestras, rock operas and a slew of pretentious and obscure lyrics’.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp.95.

<sup>12</sup> Allan F. Moore, ‘The Brilliant Career of Sgt Pepper’, Aldgate, Chapman and Marwick, *Windows* p.139.

<sup>13</sup> Sheila Whiteley, *The Space Between the Notes: Rock and the counter-culture*, (London: Routledge, 1992), p.58.

<sup>14</sup> Moore, *Rock*, pp.95.

<sup>15</sup> *Amazing Journey*.

<sup>16</sup> Keir Keightley, ‘Reconsidering Rock’, Simon Frith, Will Straw and John Street, *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp.113.

<sup>17</sup> Harry Shapiro, *Waiting for the Man: The Story of Drugs and Popular Music* (London: Quartet Books, 1988), p.146. On cross-fertilization with orchestral music and the rock sub-genre which would, in the early 1970s, come to be known as ‘Prog’, see Edward Macan, *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

As the dominant format of recorded music changed so, increasingly, did the stylistic descriptions of the content. The label 'rock' which 'first came into general use around 1967' suggested increased 'formal complexity'.<sup>18</sup> 'Rock' soon evolved, however, to include a vast number of sub-genres, making it 'a term that is instantly evocative and frustratingly vague'. Rock 'may mean rebellion in musical form'. As significantly,

rock involves a rejection of those aspects of mass-distributed music which are believed to be soft, safe or trivial, those things which may be dismissed as worthless 'pop'- the very opposite of rock. Instead, the styles, genres and performers that are thought to merit the name 'rock' must be seen as serious, significant and legitimate in some way.<sup>19</sup>

That distinction, in the 1960s and subsequently, is, of course, largely an illusion. As Keightley has observed, 'one of the great ironies of the second half of the twentieth century' was 'that while rock involved millions of people buying a mass-marketed, standardised commodity', such 'purchases ... produced intense feelings of freedom, rebellion, marginality, oppositionality, uniqueness and authenticity'. The rock-pop spectrum differs, therefore, from 'the older problem of distinguishing mass from élite or vernacular cultures' because it 'involves the making of distinctions *within* mass culture'. The result, as the reception of the Rock Operas by rock *aficionados* will demonstrate, is 'a highly stratified' and enduring 'conception of popular music'.<sup>20</sup>

Promulgation of the totality of popular music in Britain was achieved, by the mid-1960s, through 'millions of televisions, radios and phonographs'.<sup>21</sup> 'A classic example of the new importance of pop music was the establishment of pirate radio stations, broadcasting from ships and rigs anchored just outside British territorial water'.<sup>22</sup> Radio Caroline, the most popular of the many 'pirates', began broadcasting in 1964. The BBC prevailed upon the Wilson government to end such unregulated stations through the passage of the Marine Broadcasting (Offences) Act of 1967; whereupon the BBC promptly launched a nationwide pop-

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<sup>18</sup> Moore, *Rock*, pp.67.

<sup>19</sup> Keightley, 'Reconsidering', Frith, Straw and Street, *Cambridge Companion*, pp.109.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.109-110. Emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.126.

<sup>22</sup> Sandbrook, *White Heat*, p.104.



rock station, Radio 1.<sup>23</sup> ITV's *Ready, Steady, Go!* (1963-66) and the BBC's *Top of the Pops* (1964-2006) showcased up-and-coming bands on primetime television and music periodicals, both mass-market and specialist, flourished. The specialist music and underground presses nurtured a culture of gravitas which deemed rock to be 'something "more"' than the 'mere entertainment' of pop.<sup>24</sup> 'Authenticity' was a corollary. Perhaps 'the most loaded ... of all the value terms employed in music discourse', authenticity – or alleged lack of – figures prominently in the debates about the artistic validity of the Rock Opera genre.<sup>25</sup> This thesis will confirm Moore's judgement that such quibbling over terms that are essentially subjective is, frequently, 'simply rhetorical disguise for "like" and "dislike"'.<sup>26</sup>

The concept of authenticity has always, nonetheless, been ubiquitous in rock discourse. It was, and remains, predicated upon the insistence that performers must, unlike most of their 1950s predecessors, also be creators. 'Pop' implied continued separation of these two skills; 'rock' signified the 'unity of creation and communication, of origination and performance' of the artist (or group) as *auteur*.<sup>27</sup> The self-contained song-writing and performing unit of The Beatles had embedded this new paradigm. Lennon-McCartney were followed by Jagger-Richards, in the Rolling Stones, and Ray Davies, as chief song-writer of The Kinks. US contemporaries followed a similar path: Brian Wilson wrote increasingly complex vocal and instrumental pieces that took the Beach Boys far beyond the simple, close-harmony early works of the 'surf sound'. Singer Jim Morrison penned increasingly metaphysical lyrics – which he considered poetry – for the music composed and performed by The Doors. When Pete Townshend followed suit, and became The Who's chief song-writer (despite not being an instinctive composer), he confirmed how central this new 'authenticity' had become to the genre.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.104.

<sup>24</sup> Keightley, 'Reconsidering', Frith, Straw and Street, *Cambridge Companion*, p.110.

<sup>25</sup> Moore, *Rock*, p.199.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.16

<sup>27</sup> Keightley, 'Reconsidering', Frith, Straw and Street, *Cambridge Companion*, p.134.

<sup>28</sup> *Amazing Journey*.

All the musicians named in the previous paragraph professed themselves indebted to the American 'neo-folk' composer, lyricist and singer Bob Dylan. Dylan defined, from 1962, the template for subsequent artists labelled 'singer-songwriters' who as individual author-performers perhaps exceeded in non-mediated 'authenticity' even the singer-guitar-bass-drums *auteur* rock bands. Following Dylan's lead, artists such as Joni Mitchell and James Taylor in the USA and London-based Donovan and Cat Stevens 'went electric', adding a band to their voices and acoustic guitars to produce a new sub-genre of 'folk-rock'. Revelling in Dylan's 'lyrical maturity and delight in imagery', folk-rock and singer-songwriters were critically lauded and commercially successful in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>29</sup>

Authenticity and commercialization were not, therefore, *necessarily* mutually exclusive. Yet for many Counter-Culturalists, there was a diametric opposition here, specifically for those cultural outputs that they wished to condemn. This judgement is addressed in Chapter Six. John Lennon, the pre-eminent global pop-rock *auteur* and counter-cultural hero dismissed the idea that commercial success precluded artistic credibility. Barry Miles has noted that, in June 1967 – the month of *Sgt. Pepper's* release – Lennon 'scoffed' at him and 'exclaimed': "“what's wrong with commercialization? We're the most commercial band on earth!”"<sup>30</sup> Unusually, given the prominence granted to many of Lennon's pronouncements, this comment has been underplayed in rock music discourse and other Counter-Culturalist accounts.

Lennon's remark in a 1965 interview, for example, that 'we're more popular than Jesus now' caused a global furore, serving to confirm the sense of worldwide fame that underlay his statement.<sup>31</sup> It also highlighted a phenomenon identified by Bernard Levin. A prominent cultural commentator and *Times* columnist, Levin was the author, in 1970, of an informative, dispassionate critique of 1960s

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<sup>29</sup> Moore, *Rock*, pp.180-1.

<sup>30</sup> Miles, *In The Sixties*, p.193.

<sup>31</sup> Lennon added that Christianity appeared to be on course to 'vanish and sink'. His analysis that 'Jesus was all right, but his disciples were thick and ordinary' is, with the exception of Judas Iscariot, remarkably similar to their characterization in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Cited in Sandbrook, *White Heat*, p.225.

Britain.<sup>32</sup> In it, Levin describes the young actress and anti-Vietnam war campaigner Vanessa Redgrave in a manner similarly applicable to Lennon:

None represented so clearly ... another and more specialized current of the decade, namely the transformation of the performing artist into a kind of oracle or sage, whose opinions on matters of politics, economics and international affairs were eagerly canvassed and solemnly recorded.

This transformation was, as Chapter Nine will pursue, highly relevant to Pete Townshend's relationship with the media, as was Levin's conclusion that Redgrave, like Townshend, 'threw herself ... whole-heartedly into the bottomless pit of her own good-hearted confusion'.<sup>33</sup>

Townshend achieved the status of 'oracle or sage' largely thanks to The Who's 1965 hit 'My Generation', which the songwriter called a 'big social comment'. 'People saw different aspects of the record', particularly its lyrics.<sup>34</sup> With the refrain 'talkin' 'bout my generation' interpolated between each line, Roger Daltrey delivered Townshend's words with a stutter implying both teenage inarticulacy and a known side-effect of amphetamines:

People try to put us d-down  
Just because we get around  
Things they do look awful c-c-cold  
I hope I die before I get old ...

Why don't you all f-fade away  
And don't try to dig what we all s-s-say  
I'm not trying to cause a big s-s-sensation  
I'm just talkin' 'bout my g-g-g-generation

Musically, 'My Generation' is simplicity itself: rhythm and blues tinged with the late-1950s rock 'n' roll of Eddie Cochran. The energy of the delivery and the lyrics, however, made it The Who's enduring signature song and an apparent expression of the 'now' mentality of some British youths. For Melly in 1969 and

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<sup>32</sup> Bernard Levin, *The Pendulum Years: Britain and the Sixties*, (London: Jonathon Cape Ltd., 1970), p.263.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.263.

<sup>34</sup> *International Times*, number 8, 13-26/02/1967. 'My Generation' reached number 2 in the UK singles chart in early 1966. Unless otherwise stated, all chart positions in this thesis are sourced from David Roberts (ed.), *The Guinness Book of British Hit Singles & Albums* (19<sup>th</sup> edition), (London: Guinness World Records, 2006).

numerous critics since, “My Generation” is a key record in the development of British pop’.<sup>35</sup>

Its success enabled Townshend, by 1967, to opine – but not ‘in any egotistic way’ – that ‘I’m today’s powerful [and] successful young man’.<sup>36</sup> He, like Lennon, McCartney and Jagger, was in demand by mainstream media as a spokesman for young people. For the underground and music press, however, Townshend was, early in his career, the chief spokesman for ‘Mod’: a short-lived movement the historic importance of which has been over-emphasised through accumulated layers of subcultural readings.<sup>37</sup> Frith holds that ‘the most significant of Britain’s youth cults were the mods of 1962-65’; Moore adds the wise proviso that ‘the very questioning of what “mod” entailed ... must be hedged about with qualifications’.<sup>38</sup> Undoubtedly, ‘the mod cult began in the early 1960s with the “modernists”’; an alliance of ‘petit-bourgeois kids’ and ‘semi-beatniks ... in the coffeehouses of London’s Soho’.<sup>39</sup> Their early ‘exclusivity’ was expressed through admiration of Beat poetry and modern jazz; the designs and fashions of French New Wave cinema and, as their numbers and influences grew, a penchant for Italian tailoring, scooters, ‘Pop’ and ‘Op’ Art and amphetamines.

Youth subcultures, like religions, are, however, subject to variations in the zealotry of their followers and leaders. For Daltrey, The Who’s popularity with Mods was the result of an instruction from their first, pre-Lambert and Stamp manager to ‘cut your hair, go to Carnaby Street, buy all the clever gear – and all of a sudden, we were a Mod band’.<sup>40</sup> As geometric symbols and the Union Jack flag became part of ‘Mod’, ‘Mod’ became ‘a catch-all phrase’ for the ‘media-created image of “Swinging London”’.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, as a musicological term it is so vague as to be

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<sup>35</sup> Melly, *Revolt* p.116.

<sup>36</sup> *Oz* number 21, May-June 1969.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: the Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1972); Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: the Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979); Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds.), *Resistance through Rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006) (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), pp.71-79.

<sup>38</sup> Frith, *Sound Effects*, p.220; Moore, *Rock*, p.36.

<sup>39</sup> Frith, *Sound Effects*, p.220.

<sup>40</sup> *Amazing Journey*.

<sup>41</sup> Shapiro, *Waiting*, p.108.

invalid: while there was 'music that mods liked', it is 'best ignored as a musical style label'.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, according to its composer, 'My Generation' was not an autobiographical statement of intent but a critique of 'some pilled-up mod dancing around trying to explain to you why he's such a groovy guy, but he can't because he's so stoned he can hardly talk'. By 1967, Townshend was stating that The Who 'never hope or want to produce anything like it again'.<sup>43</sup>

Townshend wanted to be perceived, above all, as an 'authentic' musical artist. For Frith, 'the best of Britain's 60s pop bands was The Who because Pete Townshend was the smartest theorist'.<sup>44</sup> Marsh has concluded, more persuasively, that 'much of Townshend's theorizing was filibuster': there is a hollow ring to his frequent but vague references in interviews to 'Pop art' and the influence upon him of the 'autodestructive art' of Gustav Metzger (who lectured for a brief period while Townshend was at Ealing Art College). George Melly and *Oz* magazine were impressed and excited by Townshend's throwaway use of the terms 'cybernetic' and 'autodestructive', but, like 'Mod', they have no musicological validity.<sup>45</sup> Townshend used them to explain why he (and Keith Moon) established a trope of rock performance: the smashing of instruments at the end of concerts. Yet this began by accident. Townshend's banging of his guitar against the low ceiling of one small venue to produce feedback broke the neck of the instrument: the audience's delight ensured that aggressive destruction of instruments became a trademark climax to The Who's performances.<sup>46</sup> Townshend subsequently explained this as 'autodestructive art': for his critics it was 'just stagecraft'.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p.114; Moore, *Rock*, p.36.

<sup>43</sup> *International Times*, number 8, 13-26/02/1967.

<sup>44</sup> Simon Frith, 'Rock and the Politics of Memory', Sohnya Sayres, Anders Stephanson, Stanley Aronowitz and Frederic Jameson (eds.), *The 60s Without Apology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p.63.

<sup>45</sup> Melly, *Revolt*, pp.115-6; *Oz* number 21, May-June 1969.

<sup>46</sup> The Who ended their set in this way at the Monterey International Pop Music Festival of June 1967 in California, stimulating audience frenzy. London-based American guitar virtuoso Jimi Hendrix played after The Who, to conclude the festival. Hendrix copied Townshend and smashed his guitar, leaving the audience perplexed and Townshend irked.

<sup>47</sup> *Amazing Journey*.

Frith is right to highlight, however, the artistic achievement of the 1967 album '*The Who Sell Out* (note the title)', which is indeed 'a buoyant, funny record with a much sharper concept than *Sgt. Pepper*'.<sup>48</sup> Unified by the theme of commercialism, 'Townshend's songs were about music as *commodity*. The group took their links and jingles from a real station, the pirate Radio London', and added self-composed adverts – such as those later inserted into the movie of *Tommy* – to give the impression that the listener had tuned in to a 'pirate' station which was playing the album. Cover images of The Who in advertising poses (including Daltrey in a bath of baked beans) completed the 'mocking presentation of the group as product'.<sup>49</sup>

Townshend therefore trod the conceptual musical path which resulted in *Tommy* before his peers The Small Faces and The Kinks released their seminal 'concept' works *Ogdens' Nut Gone Flake* and *The Kinks are the Village Green Preservation Society* in May and November 1968. In December of the same year British band The Pretty Things released *S.F. Sorrow*, which has since been suggested as a precursor to and inspiration for *Tommy*.<sup>50</sup> These three albums are, however, perhaps better considered as descendents of the concluding, title track of The Who's 1966 album *A Quick One*.<sup>51</sup> Described by the band as 'a mini-opera' – and later 'the parents of *Tommy*' – this ten-minute sequence of vignettes recounts the 'tale of a girl guide who is caught in mid-grope by her boyfriend as she is being seduced by Ivor the Engine Driver'.<sup>52</sup> While it is juvenilia – unlike the similar but more sophisticated sequence of vignettes which concludes *Abbey Road*, the final album recorded by The Beatles in 1969 – *A Quick One (While She's Away)*

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<sup>48</sup> *The Who Sell Out*, released in December 1967 as Track 612 002, was remixed, remastered and rereleased as Polydor CD 527 759-8 in 1995. Frith, 'Rock', Sayres, Stephanson, Aronowitz and Jameson, *The 60s*, p.63.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p.63. Emphasis in original.

<sup>50</sup> *IT* hailed *S.F. Sorrow* as a 'beautiful' 'total experience' which was 'like an opera, with a basic story ... of a "stoned" idiot'. After the hero's birth, however, the alleged 'plot' of this 'opera' becomes even more impenetrable than that of *Tommy* (as considered in Chapter Nine). Its musical themes are not developed, it sold in limited numbers and thus, while a minor curiosity of psychedelic whimsy (which has aged badly), *S.F. Sorrow* cannot be considered a Rock Opera. *International Times*, number 45, 29/11-2/12/1968.

<sup>51</sup> *A Quick One*, released in December 1966 as Reaction 593 002, was remixed, remastered and rereleased as Polydor CD 527 759-2 in 1995.

<sup>52</sup> *Friends*, number 2, 31 January 1970.

confirms that, in 1966, Townshend was experimenting with longer-form compositions and juxtaposition of musical styles before any other British band.

By late 1968, however, despite nine top ten singles and numerous UK, European and US tours, Townshend was artistically restless. When 'I Can See For Miles' peaked only at number ten in the UK singles charts, relative lack of commercial success added to his frustration because the song was 'the best possible thing I could ever write. So I thought well, what do we do now?'<sup>53</sup> As Chapter Nine will consider, the encouragement of manager and producer Kit Lambert then led to *Tommy*, the first Rock Opera to be conceived for release on vinyl. It fulfilled the prediction of the chief music critic of *The Times*, William Mann, who, reviewing the 'pop music master class' of *Sgt. Pepper*, mused that 'sooner or later some group will take the next logical step and produce an L.P. which is a songsong-cycle, a Tin Pan Alley *Dichterliebe*'.<sup>54</sup> While there is no evidence that Pete Townshend was inspired directly by this review, his earlier experiments with the 'mini-opera' and *The Who Sell Out* suggest that this could, within the headily, competitively productive atmosphere of transatlantic rock music in the late 1960s, have been a further, perhaps essential, incitement to create *Tommy*. In the meantime, the theatrical phenomenon that was *Hair* would cross first the boundary between Off- and On-Broadway and then the Atlantic, providing the first example of the commercial and cultural factors that would together enable the birth of the Rock Opera. It is to *Hair* that this thesis turns next.

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<sup>53</sup> *Amazing Journey*.

<sup>54</sup> *The Times*, 29/05/1967. Had Townshend not understood Mann's reference, Lambert would have been familiar with Robert Schumann's 1840 setting of Heinrich Heine.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Hair*: Origins, working methods, text and music

#### 3.1 The prototype Rock Opera

As the first Rock Opera and the prototype for what would follow, *Hair* is worthy of particularly detailed scrutiny on both political and artistic grounds. *Hair* was the first work to offer a successful artistic model for the development of the genre. Nightly, over a period of five years, it portrayed and gave voice to issues of equality and diversity in sexual expression, race relations, and the apparently widening cultural gap between the generations that were central counter-cultural concerns. It promoted the allegedly 'liberating' and 'consciousness-raising' use of marijuana and hallucinogenic drugs. At its heart lay a 'cohesive, albeit somewhat skeletal, plot' which addressed the dilemma into which the young hero, Claude, is placed by being drafted to fight in Vietnam. Claude's ultimate decision to fight rather than burn his draft card results in 'his untimely, senseless death'; the inevitable corollary of *Hair's* overt and uncompromising anti-Vietnam War stance.<sup>1</sup>

*Hair* conveyed these political, social and cultural concerns through the first successful integration of pop-rock music into commercial theatre. Its production also marked the first instances of both nudity and highly graphic, sexual language in mainstream British theatre. Nonetheless, as is addressed in Chapter Six, *Hair* became, more so than 'all the commercial manifestations of hippiedom', 'the most repellent in the eyes of the counter-culture'. While Jonathon Green grudgingly concedes that *Hair* was 'the most popular' and 'most successful', this implies, apparently axiomatically in his analysis, that *Hair* should be condemned as, merely, a 'commercial manifestation'.<sup>2</sup> Only by considering the artistic and commercial genesis of *Hair* and the other three Rock Operas, their reception by audiences and reviewers, and the opinions of their creators and early performers can an attempt be made to analyze the validity of, and reasoning behind, such disparaging and seemingly illogical responses.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth L. Wollman, *The Theater Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical from 'Hair' to 'Hedwig'* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), p.47.

<sup>2</sup> Green, *All Dressed Up*, p.343.



### 3.2 Origins, working methods, text and music

Prior to opening in London's Shaftesbury Theatre in September 1968, *Hair* underwent a lengthy period of development, as befits a work which, although 'designed to invade Broadway territory', emerged from New York's 'experimental' 'Off-Broadway' theatre scene of the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> *Hair*'s creators, actors James Rado and Gerome Ragni, had first met and worked together in 1964 in the short-lived anti-capital punishment Off-Broadway musical *Hang Down Your Head and Die* by David Wright. Increasingly in-demand as actors, Ragni and Rado were promptly cast together in the Chicago company of Mike Nichols' successful production of the then-fashionable play *The Knack* by Ann Jellicoe.

On their return to New York, Ragni, in his mid-twenties, introduced Rado, in his mid-thirties, to the burgeoning experimental theatre scene. Rado had served in the US Navy before studying acting with Uta Hagen and the Strasbergs. He was also an aspiring song-writer. Ragni had served in the US Air Force, was also a poet and painter, and had become a member of New York's experimental Open Theater.<sup>4</sup> Both were increasingly attracted to the 'emerging hippie atmosphere of The [East] Village. They were inspired by the passions of the anti-war protesters in the city streets and identified strongly with the movements for liberation. Employing experimental theater methods as a jumping off place' from which to explore, subvert and challenge the form of the American musical, Ragni and Rado nonetheless fashioned their embryonic musical 'from the start ... for Broadway and mainstream audiences'.<sup>5</sup> Between 1965 and 1967 they worked together to develop their script, initially entitled *The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical*.

In 1966, Gerome Ragni was cast in the Open Space production of Megan Terry's play *Viet Rock*. Although it received mixed reviews, Scott Miller has rightly stressed *Viet Rock*'s pivotal role in putting anti-Vietnam War sentiments on stage, and the many clear influences of what he considers 'this seminal – though sadly

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<sup>3</sup> James Rado, *Hairabilia* <http://www.hairthemusical.com/history.html> (accessed 03/12/2006).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.hairthemusical.com/story.html>, © James Rado, 2004 (accessed 03/12/2006); *The Independent*, 27/03/2010; *Hair*, Gielgud Theatre programme, June 2010.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.hairthemusical.com/story.html>.

forgotten – work of experimental theatre’ upon both the content and form of *Hair*.<sup>6</sup> In developing the text of *Viet Rock*, Terry used techniques of group improvisation which were becoming commonplace within experimental theatre groups on both sides of the Atlantic. As Miller notes, *Viet Rock* contained many of the other stylistic tropes which defined the concept of ‘experimental’ theatre and placed it in opposition to the ‘boulevard theatre’ of the proscenium arch and the ‘well-made play’:

The text was hardly a finished product ... As with *Hair*, even after the script of *Viet Rock* was published, in 1967, subsequent productions did not feel the necessity of sticking slavishly to the text. Each production was a source of rediscovery and reconstruction. Also, because of this creation process, the end result rarely had the kind of structure and logic to which mainstream theatre seemed shackled. And because of its improvisational roots, *Viet Rock* – much like *Hair* – was full of pop culture references to movies, commercials, political slogans, TV shows, and ... Shakespeare ... Many other devices in *Hair* can also be found in *Viet Rock* – actors becoming children; the use of nudity; references to other American wars ... specific anti-war chants from the 1960s; a scene of parachuting from a helicopter ... soldiers crawling on their bellies through the jungle; references to ‘the red man and the yellow man’ ... [and] the use of incense and slow motion.<sup>7</sup>

Rado and Ragni rejected the efforts of several composers to set their lyrics for *Hair* to music. Canadian composer Galt MacDermot – a short-haired, suit-wearing sometime church organist with a background in jazz, an admiration for African music and little knowledge of the counter-culture – was introduced to them by music publisher Nat Shapiro; although MacDermot recalls that ‘it took him a long time, cause they were pretty far-out guys, and he didn’t know how we’d get along.’<sup>8</sup> His would-be collaborators insisted on taking MacDermot to the East Village ‘to soak up the atmosphere. “They’d say ‘You’ve got to see how these people live or you won’t be able to write this music.’” This experience ‘was a little embarrassing’ for all concerned ‘because I was wearing a tie and white shirt’.<sup>9</sup> MacDermot, Ragni and Rado, however, ‘got along fine’.<sup>10</sup> Within less than three weeks, MacDermot had composed a score consisting of exactly the ‘kind of pop

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<sup>6</sup> Scott Miller, *Let the Sun Shine In: The Genius of Hair* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003), p.56.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p.57, 60.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Wollman, *The Theater*, p.45.

<sup>9</sup> *Hair*, Gielgud Theatre programme, June 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Wollman, *The Theater*, p.45.

rock/showtune hybrid' which Ragni and Rado hoped would 'be something new for Broadway'.<sup>11</sup> In a marked break with the then average of around 12 to 15 songs per show, *Hair* initially featured twenty songs. By the time it reached Broadway the score consisted of 33 songs. Equally radically, some songs, such as 'Sodomy' and 'Air', were of less than 90 seconds duration.

Set in October 1967 in New York's East Village, *Hair* received its world premiere Off-Broadway in the East Village on 18 October 1967. It was the first production in the Anspacher Theatre, the new, avowedly experimental, studio space of the New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theater which was based in the downtown former public library of the East Village.<sup>12</sup> The Public Theatre had been founded, in 1954, by 'Joseph Papp, passionate advocate of free public theatre ... with the intention of imitating the London branch of the Royal Shakespeare Company in putting on contemporary productions.'<sup>13</sup> Papp had planned to open the Anspacher auditorium with a production of John Arden's *Armstrong's Last Goodnight*. On reading the script of *Hair*, however, Papp asked himself 'why the hell am I doing an English play?' and, boldly, scheduled *The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* as the inaugural production in his new studio space.<sup>14</sup>

Directed by Gerald Freeman, Artistic Director of the Public Theatre, and choreographed by Ana Sokolow, *Hair* was the first non-Shakespeare production which Papp had produced.<sup>15</sup> Rado has stressed that 'Jerry and I wrote *Hair* for the uptown big theatre audiences' of 'the George M. Cohan Great White Way', but admits that 'we couldn't get a tumble from any of the Broadway producers.' Although no show had ever moved from Off- to On-Broadway, Ragni and Rado nonetheless seized the Public Theater production as an opportunity to 'get it jump-started downtown'.<sup>16</sup> While many of Papp's subscribers were outraged by *Hair*, and 'even greater outrage greeted the rock *Hamlet* which followed ... Papp

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.hairthemusical.com/story.html>

<sup>12</sup> *The Times*, 29/03/2010.

<sup>13</sup> Marwick, *The Sixties*, p.346.

<sup>14</sup> *The Times*, 29/03/2010.

<sup>15</sup> Wollman, *The Theater*, p.44.

<sup>16</sup> Rado, *Hairabilia*.

made it clear that he was interested not in middle-class Broadway audiences, but in the youth who were in some way concerned with contemporary issues'.<sup>17</sup>

*Hair*, with its central thematic concerns of Vietnam, drugs, sexuality, race, and rebellion against authority, fitted perfectly into Papp's programming preferences. The challenge it presented to the prevailing norms of musical theatre was, however, one of artistic form as much as political content. Elizabeth L. Wollman has observed that, due to its episodic structure of 'loosely connected songs and sketches' and 'interrelated vignettes ... it is certainly easy to mistake *Hair* for a musical with no cohesive story'. A dramatic through-line is, however, provided by the emotional journey of the young hero, Claude Bukowski, 'who flees his parents' middle-class home in Queens for the hippie enclave of Greenwich Village'. Claude wrestles with the dilemma of whether or not to submit to the compulsory military conscription of 'the draft', 'while spending time with his friends, fighting with his parents, and pining after Sheila, a politically active student at New York University'. Wollman, perceptively, concludes that, 'thus, while *Hair* ... departs from convention in its reliance on techniques that came to fruition Off and Off-Off-Broadway during the 1950s and 1960s ... it nevertheless ... does have a cohesive plot'.<sup>18</sup>

The majority of New York theatre critics understood and embraced this bold experimentation with – but not complete rejection of – the musical theatre form. Indeed, while noting its relative structural incoherence in comparison with the traditional, and still-dominant, 'well-made' musical play, *New York Times* reviewer Howard Taubman placed the 1967 Public Theater production within a longer historical context of theatrical development:

The storyline of *Hair* is so attenuated that it would be merciful to label the piece a review. Examined under this rubric, it can be appreciated for what it essentially is - a wild, indiscriminate explosion of exuberant, impertinent youthful talents. What if coherence is lacking, discipline meagre and taste often deplorable? The youngsters – authors and performers – have the kind of vitality that sends the memories of an old theatregoer wandering

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<sup>17</sup> Marwick, *The Sixties*, p.346.

<sup>18</sup> Wollman, *The Theater*, p.47.

back to the twenties – to the bright impudence of 'The Grand Street Follies' and 'The Garrick Gaieties'.<sup>19</sup>

Joseph Papp did not envisage a future for *Hair* beyond its initial six-week run. Ragni and Rado were, however, determined to overhaul radically both the piece and its personnel to achieve the Broadway hit they desired. The intervention of producer Michael Butler and new director Tom O'Horgan was essential in transforming *Hair* from a transient, soon-to-be-forgotten piece of 'experimental' or 'fringe' theatre (like Terry's *Viet Rock*) into a worldwide success. By cross-fertilizing counter-cultural creativity with an awareness of changing demands within the mainstream cultural marketplace, Butler and O'Horgan were central to the development of *Hair* into a creative and economic template for the Rock Opera genre.

Michael Butler had no previous involvement with the theatre prior to producing *Hair* around the world. He came from a wealthy Chicago family with world-wide financial and industrial interests. During the extensive travel and expensive education of his privileged upbringing, Butler had become acquainted with the young John F. Kennedy. In 1967 Butler was an active, ambitious and well-connected young Democrat politician, preparing to run for state senator in Illinois.<sup>20</sup> He underwent what he describes as 'a major change from being a very military, establishment guy to being very much against the Vietnam War'; although Butler does not confirm Miller's claim that this *volte face* occurred as a direct result of smoking pot for the first time.<sup>21</sup> On a visit to New York with Illinois Governor Otto Kerner (who was meeting his co-chair of the Kerner Commission on Civil Disorder, New York Mayor John Lindsey) Butler saw the original *Hair* poster featuring Native Americans. Mistakenly assuming that they were the subject of the piece, Butler went to see the show at the Public Theater.

I thought 'my God, this would be fantastic to have my constituents in Illinois see this show', because that was the strongest anti-war statement I'd ever seen. So ... I got an introduction to Papp and went to talk with him. I said

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<sup>19</sup> Cited in Jonathon Johnson, *Good Hair Days: A Personal Journey with the American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2004), p.13.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.14-15.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p.175; Miller, *Let the Sun*, p.69.

I'd like to take the show to Chicago and he said 'no we don't do that. Like most Rep companies we run a show for a month, six weeks, then we close it, shut it down and that's it'.<sup>22</sup>

Butler returned to Illinois disappointed, only to receive a call from Papp a few days later offering the opportunity to co-produce *Hair*. Butler 'immediately said yes. I decided I would do that instead of running for political office. So I came to New York, made a call to the Mayor and the Governor ... and told them I was not going to run'.<sup>23</sup>

In his many interviews in the subsequent four decades, Butler has maintained consistently that, as a result of *Hair*, he underwent a Damascene conversion. This resulted in his enacting a central mantra and tenet of the American counter-culture as famously crystallized by Harvard University professor and proselytizer for LSD, Timothy Leary: Butler 'tuned in, turned on and dropped out'.<sup>24</sup> His embrace of Leary's philosophy (which is mentioned several times in the text of *Hair*) appears to have been whole-hearted. While Butler admits that the initial appeal of *Hair* lay in its exciting 'commercial possibilities', he soon 'realised the depths of its social effects.' Having abandoned his aspirations within the conventional political system in order to promote and stage a 'hippy musical', Butler would, with extraordinary success, challenge the conventional constraints and prevailing values of the entertainment industry of the late 1960s to bring the 'social effects' of *Hair* to a worldwide audience.

This spreading of a counter-cultural message would require, however, the use of capitalist commerce. For this, Butler and *Hair* attracted vocal and sustained criticism from the Counter-Culturalists. Why this would be so, whilst other groups whose work was brought (or sold) to the world by the same means – including The Beatles, The Stones and The Who – escaped such censure is addressed in Chapter Six.

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<sup>22</sup> Cited in Johnson, *Good Hair*, p.175.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.175.

<sup>24</sup> Timothy Leary's copious articles and books on the allegedly 'consciousness-raising' and 'sacramental' qualities of LSD include *The Politics of Ecstasy* (London: Paladin, 1970).

Former Broadway cast member Jonathon Johnson, however, (notwithstanding his obsequious tone towards his former employers) summarizes accurately the central role of Butler and his investment of capital. In order for *Hair* to achieve the economy of scale and thus the consciousness-raising power which its authors sought,

logic leads me to believe, had it not been for Michael Butler ... getting involved with *Hair* when he did, the world would not have benefited from this great piece of work. The foundation of talent was there from the artistic side but what was really needed was the fusion of Michael's worldly business, political prowess, financial expertise and capital.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, Rado and Ragni were entirely happy that the now Butler-Public Theater co-production should transfer to the unlikely venue of the Cheetah Discotheque in Manhattan: 'We liked the idea ... hey, we were getting closer to Broadway.' During this second run (which was terminated due to the Cheetah's impending closure) they became convinced, however, that the piece needed radical changes. The authors claim that their producer, Butler, wanted to transfer the production to Broadway unchanged and was initially reluctant to invest in the extra rehearsal time which re-development would require.<sup>26</sup> Butler, however, has stated that he too saw the need for further changes to ensure that *Hair* could reach the larger audience they all sought. With the hero, Claude, dying in Vietnam but not being symbolically resurrected, there was no hint of a happy ending. Wollman has noted the crucial role in cementing the performer-audience relationship provided by the addition, as a finale, of what would become one of *Hair's* most memorable and famous songs: 'Let the Sun Shine In'. A 'rousing, anthemic number' sung 'directly to the audience', Wollman identifies in it a rock-musical template for finale numbers which 'are often about finding connections to other people in the face of alienation or adversity, and are thus meant to celebrate both the musicals' characters and the audience themselves'. She, perceptively, views the 'Long Live God/Prepare Ye/Day by Day (reprise)' finale of *Godspell* as performing the same dramatic function.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, a similar function is fulfilled by 'Listening To You', the repetitive, mantra-like finale of *Tommy*. In the case of *Hair*,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.16.

<sup>26</sup> Rado, *Hairabilia*.

<sup>27</sup> Wollman, *The Theater*, p.72.

however, there is little doubt that, prior to the spiritually-uplifting addition of 'Let The Sun Shine In', the plot was, in the words of Michael Butler, 'a bit of a "bummer"'.<sup>28</sup>

Henceforth, the development of *Hair* became an even more unusual exercise in combining the *avant-garde* theatre's concern for the sanctity of the communal, creative process with the desire to achieve a marketable end product with wide popular appeal. As Butler points out, the proselytizing effect of the piece – which he considered profoundly political – could only be achieved by making it palatable to those who were neither theatre sophisticates nor self-defined believers in the counter-culture. In order to preach to those other than the already-converted, however, counter-cultural belief in the liberating potential of marijuana (either literal or symbolic) played a key part:

Number one, the authors wanted to make some changes. Number two, the director [Gerald Freedman], who was a fabulous director, but he'd never smoked grass. He was more into beatniks than he was into hippies. He didn't really understand where it was coming from ... The real problem was the show needed some changes and the show had a very tough ending; there was nothing pleasant about it... That was fine for a very esoteric audience that is used to 200 seats or 99 seats, people who are deeply into theatre and all that. But for getting a message across to the general public, you've got to feed them a little hope. Otherwise, it becomes a pretty dark scene.<sup>29</sup>

*Hair* was, therefore, entirely re-written (with input from the cast throughout rehearsals), re-cast and re-designed under the authors' preferred director, Tom O'Horgan. The show opened at the Biltmore Theater on 29 April 1968 to such acclaim that O'Horgan re-staged his Broadway production in London. O'Horgan also directed the Los Angeles, San Francisco and Chicago productions; three of the fourteen US productions which played concurrently.<sup>30</sup> Ragni had wanted O'Horgan to direct *Hair* since seeing *Futz* by Rochelle Owen; 'an absurdist parable about a farmer's love for his pig'. This was one of several O'Horgan productions at Ellen Stewart's Café LaMama studio for which he won the 1967

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<sup>28</sup> Cited in Johnson, *Good Hair*, p.15.

<sup>29</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p.176.

<sup>30</sup> Stanley Richards (ed.), *Great Rock Musicals* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979) p.381.



'Obie' award for best Off-Off-Broadway director.<sup>31</sup> By 1967, O'Horgan was in charge of the offshoot LaMaMa Experimental Theatre Club, which 'was organized as a private club to circumvent laws governing public performances'; a useful training for the authoritarian challenges over 'indecenty' which *Hair* would encounter on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>32</sup>

Mary Davis, one of the original Broadway cast, has given a detailed account of the rehearsal techniques which O'Horgan used with both his New York and London *Hair* casts. Through what he named his 'sensitivity exercises', 'based on exploratory touching, intensive examination, and attentive listening', O'Horgan sought 'to foster a mutual trust and understanding essential to ensemble work'.<sup>33</sup> His methods, however – which Barbara Lee Horn has summarized as 'extreme permissiveness based on exploratory improvisation' – were a radical and sometimes disturbing departure from the normal working experience of a 'jobbing' actor-singer-dancer such as Davis and the majority of the original *Hair* cast. One such exercise required that the cast form small circles around an actor.

Tom would ask the one in the center to close his or her eyes, stiffen the body, and free-fall at random. Those of us on the periphery of the circle were supposed to catch him before he hit the ground and push him upright. Once upright, the person would fall again. It became a constant scramble to keep whoever was in the center from falling ... until the free-faller changed places with someone else and everyone got a chance to do it.<sup>34</sup>

Breathing exercises were followed by the actors being instructed to lie on the floor, close their eyes and concentrate on relaxing every part of their bodies while O'Horgan, 'lifting a leg here or an arm there to see if there was any tension ... would coax us in a soft-spoken voice, easing us along'. Davis 'felt very uncomfortable lying on the floor doing this. I felt overexposed and vulnerable, not to mention ridiculous'. She also recalls 'being lifted above the heads of the cast

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<sup>31</sup> Barbara Lee Horn, *The Age of Hair: Evolution and Impact of Broadway's First Rock Musical* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991), p.40. On O'Horgan's career until the mid-1970s, see Bill Simmer, 'The Theatrical Style of Tom O'Horgan', *The Drama Review*, Vol. 21, No.2, (June 1977), pp.59-66.

<sup>32</sup> Horn, *The Age*, p.16.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.52-53.

<sup>34</sup> Mary Davis, *Letting Down My Hair: Two Years with the Love-Rock Tribe* (London: Paul Elek, 1974), pp.35-36.

and passed around, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, being all shook up all the while by the cast'.<sup>35</sup>

Such exercises became an increasingly commonplace theatrical working method in the UK and USA from the 1970s onwards.<sup>36</sup> Although by no means universally applied to the rehearsal of every text even in the twenty-first century, 'trust' exercises of this type were familiar to the overwhelming majority of young actors by the end of the twentieth century.<sup>37</sup> Simultaneously, the devising or development of theatre texts through the process of rehearsal would cease to be 'a "fringe" or "underground" mode of work' and become a technique commonly 'taught at school, university and drama school'.<sup>38</sup> It should therefore be emphasized that in the late 1960s, the application of such processes to the rehearsal of a piece of Broadway or West End musical theatre – and, thus, to the development of the text itself – was a radical new departure. For an actor accustomed to plays being staged through 'blocking' – the physical placing of actors within the set according to the director's (sometimes pre-ordained) plan – exposure to such working methods could initially be an unsettling experience. The process of allowing the 'blocking' of a piece to emerge during rehearsals can still, in the twenty-first century, be confusing and intimidating (if often, ultimately, psychologically liberating) for an actor used to being told by directors where to stand, when to move, and even how to say their lines. Applying such exercises 'off the text' – without relating them to a specific scene or section of dialogue, but to develop a sense of spontaneous, ensemble interaction – was a profound shift for the commercial theatre in 1968. As Mary Davis states, 'these exercises were completely new to me. I couldn't figure out what they had to do with the show'.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp.36, 43.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Ralph Yarrow and Anthony Frost, 'Great Britain', Ralph Yarrow (ed.), *European Theatre 1960-1990: Cross-cultural Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.222-225.

<sup>37</sup> The author, for example, participated in such exercises on an almost daily basis during his three-year National Conference of Drama Schools (NCDT)/Equity-accredited acting training at Queen Margaret College (now University), Edinburgh, between 1993 and 1996. He further encountered them in a wide variety of theatrical contexts during ten years of working as a theatre actor in the UK. When considered appropriate by an individual director, he experienced them in rehearsals for productions of texts ranging from new, devised pieces to a traditional-dress production of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*.

<sup>38</sup> Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling, *Devising Performance: a Critical History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.21.

<sup>39</sup> Davis, *Letting Down*, p.36.

O'Horgan's use of the entire auditorium, enabling the cast to interact with the audience prior to and throughout the show, was another revelatory departure for the musical theatre form. His staging of the piece broke through the 'Fourth Wall'; the prevailing convention of 'realist' theatre which places audience and cast on either side of a mutually-accepted imaginary 'wall' demarcated by the proscenium arch of the stage. Indeed, O'Horgan's original ideas for using the entire theatre space had been more radical. These reflected his belief 'in the total experience of theatre'.<sup>40</sup> He considered staging *Hair* as a promenade piece with the audience able to move wherever they wanted around the playing area. He failed in his attempts to persuade theatre ushers to wear costumes in the style of the show. Johnson even claims that 'Tom also thought it would be great if some of the actors could actually live in the theatre. That notion was dropped for obvious reasons'; although Johnson neglects to explain what those 'obvious reasons' were.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, O'Horgan did achieve his objective of engendering a more 'environmental situation' than had hitherto been achieved in a Broadway or West End musical. For him, 'going to the theatre should be a total life experience. The beginnings and endings are so formalized in our minds now'.<sup>42</sup> On entering the auditorium the audience would discover that there was no 'formalized' beginning to the action of *Hair*. Instead, they would encounter members of the cast

dressing and putting on makeup in preparation for the performance. Other cast members, already in character, were scattered throughout the house. 'They were there, lying, sleeping in the aisles,' Tom O'Horgan remembers with a chuckle. 'You had to step over them. There were actors in people's seats – sometimes they would take somebody and put them in the wrong seat. And so you never quite knew when the show started, and that's what I wanted to happen. As if it were going on forever'.<sup>43</sup>

The impetus to include the famous nude scene also came from O'Horgan, with Butler's active encouragement. Ragni and Rado had, from the outset, been 'inspired by an event that took place at a "be-in" in Central Park, when two men in the midst of the crowd took off their clothes.' Rado had recalled that 'everybody around was just amazed and astounded. It was the perfect hippie happening, and

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<sup>40</sup> *International Times*, number 41, 4-17/10/1968.

<sup>41</sup> Johnson, *Good Hair*, p.18.

<sup>42</sup> *International Times*, number 41, 4-17/10/1968.

<sup>43</sup> Wollman, *The Theater*, p.48.

we felt it had to be in the play'.<sup>44</sup> Joseph Papp had vetoed any suggestion of nudity in the original Public Theater production.<sup>45</sup> O'Horgan, however, was confident that nudity would be acceptable on Broadway 'under a New York statute ... on condition that actors should not be moving but standing still'.<sup>46</sup> Mary Davis, a member of the first *Hair* cast to disrobe, recalls that 'when Tom mentioned that a nude scene was planned for the show, most of the cast thought that was going too far. It seemed so impossible that I didn't even think about it at first'. Costume designer Nancy Potts 'said they discussed faking it with body stockings, but she advised Tom to make it all or nothing. They said no more about it'. Potts and the cast 'forgot all about it ... but neither Tom nor management did. Michael Butler talked to us, saying that nudity was an important part of the hippie movement; it was part of showing that you were free, liberated, together. In other words, that we were really all the things the show said we were supposed to be'.<sup>47</sup>

This reflects a central concern of both casting and rehearsals under O'Horgan.

He

was convinced that Broadway and its audiences needed to be revitalized by a powerful dose of experimental theatrics. In the Biltmore souvenir programme, he explained: 'I took this assignment because I feel *Hair* is an assault on the theatrical dead end: Broadway. It's almost an effort to give Broadway mouth-to-mouth resuscitation'.<sup>48</sup>

While recognizing that by no means all of the performers would themselves be hippies the creative team 'were less interested in professionalism than they were in finding actors who could interpret the material realistically. "We were looking for the real thing," O'Horgan says'.<sup>49</sup> In the search for this 'realism', some who were cast in *Hair* had been encouraged to sing rock songs at their auditions; 'a practice that was unheard of on Broadway at the time'.<sup>50</sup> By the end of rehearsals

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<sup>44</sup> *The Independent*, 27/03/2010.

<sup>45</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 27/03/2010.

<sup>46</sup> *The Independent*, 27/03/2010.

<sup>47</sup> Davis, *Letting Down*, pp.59-60.

<sup>48</sup> Undated 'Biltmore Souvenir Programme', cited in Horn, *The Age*, p.40.

<sup>49</sup> Wollman, *The Theater*, p.48.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.48-49. Wollman recounts the example of 'Heather MacRae, who replaced original cast member Diane Keaton eight months into the run', describing MacRae as 'perhaps the first actor in history to audition for a Broadway show with Jefferson Airplane's 1967 hit "White Rabbit"'. This song, by the US 'acid-rock' group, rapidly became a counter-cultural anthem due to its perceived celebration of drug use.

for Broadway, 'the real thing' had come to include nudity; although Davis 'never gave it another thought until the first preview show' when the nude scene was performed.<sup>51</sup>

The appropriate point in the action had become apparent to Ragni, Rado and even those actors initially reluctant to undress. At the end of Act One Claude sings the ballad 'Where Do I Go?' During this soliloquy, addressed to the audience, he wrestles with his existential dilemma of whether or not to fight in Vietnam. Having watched his friends burn their draft cards, Claude nonetheless resolves, by the end of the song, to join the army; despite his premonition that this will result in his death. The entire cast, many of them naked, stands behind Claude in semi-light (or semi-darkness) to provide a physical reflection of his psychological self-examination. Not all who disrobed did so every night, nor did the management ever make it compulsory for any actor to do so.

*The Independent's* Mick Brown, however, would note, sagely, forty years later that while 'in keeping with the libertarian spirit of the day there was no obligation for cast members to strip of; in keeping with the commercial instincts of Broadway, they were paid a \$10 bonus if they did'. Nonetheless, *Sunday Times* critic Alan Brien commended the company in 1968 for not diluting the piece to make it more palatable for Broadway. Indeed, he noted that the nude scene had not been part of the previous, 'experimental', Off-Broadway presentations but had been added 'especially for Broadway'. O'Horgan, in accord with Bulter, Ragni and Rado, had resisted the '[usual] ... notion ... to clean a show up for Broadway and make it more Disney-like'. Instead, 'in this case we got back to where the nitty-gritty of the thing was, the real ideas'. This resulted in Brien's further approval that, in comparison to the earlier scripts and productions, Ragni and Rado, 'the young authors of the book and lyrics who also play and sing the two leading roles, have toughened and sharpened their attack on an adult way of life they regard as cruel, hypocritical and selfish as they reach a wider audience'.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Davis, *Letting Down*, p.60.

<sup>52</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 28/04/1968.

A key aspect of that 'attack' was on the representation of race; both on stage and in society. Davis has questioned Rado's claims that *Hair* 'was a theatrical breakthrough' in terms of its representation of race on stage, and 'the first show with a truly integrated cast'.<sup>53</sup> Her memoirs are, however, tainted by obvious professional disappointment at never being promoted from the ranks of the ensemble (referred to as 'The Tribe' in *Hair*) to play a principal role.<sup>54</sup> There can be little doubt that the opportunities offered to black actors by *Hair* in the US in 1967 and UK in 1968 were extraordinary in both artistic and political terms.

Early in Act One, the character of Hud introduces himself by confronting the audience, through the song 'Colored Spade', with the terms of racial stereotyping and abuse he encounters in his daily life:

I am a colored spade, a nigra, a black nigger  
A jungle bunny, jigaboo, coon, pickaninny, Mau-Mau  
Uncle Tom, Aunt Jemima, Little Black Sambo  
Cotton pickin' swamp guinea, junk man, shoe shine boy ...

The Tribe support and encourage Hud, turning the origins and continued use of such terms back upon the audience with their repeated interjection 'So you say!'<sup>55</sup> The song 'Dead End' turns the prohibitive traffic signs painted on the stage to represent a New York street into a metaphorical mantra of social oppression for the black cast members: 'Keep Off The Grass'; 'Don't Walk'; 'Red Light'.<sup>56</sup>

Humour is also used to great effect in challenging racial stereotypes. In the second of the medley of songs 'Black Boys/White Boys', three black women – wearing wigs and what transpires to be one large, adjoining sequined dress –

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<sup>53</sup> <http://www.hairthemusical.com/history.html>

<sup>54</sup> Jonathon Johnson's collage of oral testimony, *Good Hair Days*, presents the opposite problem: he is extremely sycophantic towards Michael Butler, presumably to ensure Butler's contributions to the book. Johnson's own attitudes are filtered through lengthy, confessional passages about his drug problems and born-again Christianity subsequent to his time in *Hair*. These abstruse sections further confuse what is, in parts, an informative 'scrapbook' of anecdotes from dozens of *Hair* actors (almost exclusively from the US); although no explanation is offered of Johnson's processes of eliciting, selecting and editing these contributions.

<sup>55</sup> Jerome Ragni and James Rado, *The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical: Hair* (Revised) script, (New York: Tams-Witmark Music Library, Inc., 1995). Music by Galt McDermott. Original Book © 1966, 1969 Jerome Ragni and James Rado, Revised Book © 1995 Jerome Ragni and James Rado, pp.11-12.

<sup>56</sup> Marianne Price, email to the author, 16/06/2006; *Hair* script, p.15.

affectionately parody the stage personas of The Supremes.<sup>57</sup> They extol the joys of inter-racial relationships and encourage the whole Tribe in calling for more 'mixed media!'<sup>58</sup> In the 'politically incorrect comedy number' 'Abie Baby' a black woman plays Abraham Lincoln. While having his/her shoes shined by a white, blonde woman, 'three black tribe members sing joyously about being freed by Lincoln, in a stereotypical Hollywood black dialect.'<sup>59</sup> They praise Lincoln as the 'Emanci-mother-fucking-pator of the slaves', then switch to the gentle, background, 'doo-wop' musical style of black vocal groups of the 1940s and 1950s such as The Ink Spots and The Platters, over which

the black female Abe Lincoln recites a contorted Gettysburg Address, peppered with modern black references...Hud becomes, just for a moment, black separatist LeRoi Jones, who threatens to kill the 'interfering' white man Abraham Lincoln – still played by a black woman, of course. The joke here implies that the black separatists were so extreme they would even refuse help from the man who freed American slaves.<sup>60</sup>

Eventually 'shot' by a caricature John Wilkes Booth with the single shouted word 'Bang!', Lincoln refuses to die. Instead, he/she responds: 'Bang? Bang my ass. I ain't dying for no white man'.<sup>61</sup>

Much of *Hair* is an eclectic *bricolage* of such pop-cultural, counter-cultural, historical and literary references. The script often resembles favoured counter-cultural forms such as the stream-of-consciousness poetic style of the Beats, or the 'cut-up' technique of William Burroughs. The hero, Claude Hooper Bukowski – who 'finds that it's groovy to hide in a movie, pretend he's Fellini and Antonioni and also his countryman Roman Polanski all rolled into one' – shares a surname with the Beat poet Charles Bukowski.<sup>62</sup> His sidekick, George Berger, describes himself in his introductory speech – which he addresses directly to the audience, having entered by swinging on a rope over their heads and across the auditorium

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<sup>57</sup> Female vocal trio The Supremes, led by Diana Ross, were the most prominent of the large roster of black, soul-music artists who found global success through Berry Gordy's Detroit-based Motown record label from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s. Increasingly noted for their glamorous gowns and impeccable stage presentation as much as for their music, The Supremes reached number one in the UK singles chart in late 1964 with 'Baby Love'.

<sup>58</sup> *Hair* script, pp.63-65.

<sup>59</sup> Miller, *Let the Sun*, p.113.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, p.113.

<sup>61</sup> *Hair* script, p.74

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

– as a ‘psychedelic teddy bear’. This description of the character was happily interpolated by Ragni and Rado from Clive Barnes’ first *New York Times* review.<sup>63</sup> Many of the characters are ‘hung up’ on – sexually attracted to – each other, but the polymorphously perverse (male) character of Woof is happily ‘hung up’ on Mick Jagger.<sup>64</sup>

The song ‘Three-Five-Zero-Zero’ quotes from the poem *Wichita Vortex Sutra* by the guest of honour at the 1965 Albert Hall International Poetry Incarnation, Allen Ginsberg.<sup>65</sup> This song occurs during Claude’s Act Two ‘trip’, which is stimulated by smoking a particularly potent or hallucinogenic-laced joint.<sup>66</sup> In the Act One ‘Be-In’ sequence, MacDermot interpolates Hare Krishna chants, with Rado and Ragni rhyming ‘Hare Rama’ with ‘Mari Juana’ before quoting, *verbatim*, anti-war protest chants such as ‘hell no, we won’t go’.<sup>67</sup> The song ‘Air’ – ‘Welcome sulphur dioxide, Hello carbon monoxide’ – was a prescient warning about pollution and marked a growing societal awareness of the concerns of the nascent environmental movement.<sup>68</sup> Shakespeare is also cited: MacDermot’s setting of the speech ‘What a Piece of Work Is Man’ from *Hamlet* Act 2 Scene II is sung during Claude’s ‘trip’.<sup>69</sup> The Tribe sings a setting of ‘Eyes Look Your Last’, Romeo’s dying lines from Act V Scene III of *Romeo and Juliet*, as a counterpoint to Claude in ‘The Flesh Fails/Let the Sunshine In’. The chorus concludes with Hamlet’s dying line, ‘The rest is silence’.<sup>70</sup>

Astrological belief – or superstition – is also apparent in the text. Davis recalls that Ragni, Rado, O’Horgan and Butler were all influenced by astrology, as is demonstrated in *Hair*’s opening – and most famous – song, ‘Aquarius’. Miller has

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<sup>63</sup> *The New York Times*, 30/10/1967.

<sup>64</sup> *Hair* script, p.49

<sup>65</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Wichita Vortex Sutra*, 1966, <http://www.allenginsberg.org/library/Text/7007.pdf> (accessed 12/03/2007).

<sup>66</sup> *Hair* script, pp.77-78.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.53-54.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.19-20. See, for example: Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963); John Barr (ed.), *The Environmental Handbook: Action Guide for the UK* (London: Ballantine/Friends of the Earth/Pan, 1971); John Sheail, *An Environmental History of Twentieth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

<sup>69</sup> *Hair* script, pp. 78-79. Gerome Ragni had played ‘an attendant’ in the production of *Hamlet* starring Richard Burton and directed by John Gielgud at the Lunt-Fontanne Theater on Broadway in 1964.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.88-89.



explained that this title refers to the astrological 'age' which began on 2 February 1962, when

the moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn all aligned in the constellation Aquarius. All seven of these heavenly bodies had not come together for 2,500 years. Many people believed it was the dawning of a new age, the age of Aquarius, symbolizing a pooling of everyone's creativity, an age of communalism.<sup>71</sup>

O'Horgan's Broadway staging of this opening number, replicated exactly in London, became an iconic, ritualistic theatrical moment which again demonstrated a debt to the experimental theatre movement: indeed, this 'coming together on stage in a large circle' was, once again, 'borrowed directly from the opening of *Viet Rock*'. London cast member Marianne Price recalls the carnivalesque, 'ritual summoning of the tribe' with which *Hair* began:

The show started with members of the Tribe out in the auditorium and in the front of house giving out flowers and then when a sound that we all recognize is heard we had to do a slow motion up onto the stage. This was hard and we had to stay focused as some members of the audience would laugh or try to stop us. Then we would assemble on the stage and form a circle with our arms supporting one another from our shoulders and dance round a firepot on stage while someone started singing 'Aquarius' which we then joined in with on the chorus.<sup>72</sup>

This opening 'Aquarius' sequence made a forceful impression upon Clive Barnes of *The New York Times*, who saw in it

a mood picture of a generation – a generation dominated by drugs, sex, and the two wars, the one about color and the one about Vietnam. Not that these two are made so separate. As someone says: 'The draft is white people sending black people to fight yellow people to protect the country they stole from red people'.<sup>73</sup>

Barnes had praised *Hair's* first production as 'an honest attempt to jolt the American musical into the nineteen-sixties, and a musical that is trying to relate to something other than Sigmund Romberg'.<sup>74</sup> Barnes had, in his capacity as a member of the prestigious New York Critics' Circle, voted, unsuccessfully, for *Hair*

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<sup>71</sup> Miller, *Let the Sun*, pp.6-7.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.60; Price, email, 16/06/2006.

<sup>73</sup> *The New York Times*, 30/10/1967. The author of this interpolated statement was American Black Power activist Stokely Carmichael, who first used it in a speech in April 1967.

<sup>74</sup> *The New York Times*, 30/10/1967. Sigmund Romberg (1887-1951) was a Hungarian-born, American-based composer of popular operettas, including *The Student Prince* (1924) and *The Desert Song* (1926).

as Best Musical of 1967.<sup>75</sup> Now he declared it ‘the first Broadway musical in some time to have the authentic voice of today rather than the day before yesterday’. He particularly commended the authors of the previously ‘dowdy book – and brilliant lyrics’ for doing ‘a very brave thing. They have in effect done away with [the book] altogether. “Hair” is now a musical with a theme, not a story’.

Barnes also highlighted the stylistic variety of the musical score which, through its broadly-based appeal, proved central to *Hair*’s success:

This is a happy show musically. Galt MacDermot’s music is merely pop-rock, with strong soothing overtones of Broadway melody, but it precisely serves its purpose, and its noisy and cheerful conservatism is just right for an audience that might wince at ‘Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band’.<sup>76</sup>

Much of the *Hair* score consists of relentless, rhythmically-driven, lyrically tongue-twisting and almost onomatopoeiac rock-pop numbers such as ‘Ain’t Got No’, ‘Hair’ and ‘I Got Life’. These fulfil a similar *bravura* musical and dramatic function – albeit in a different tonal vein and lyrical register – to the witty ‘patter songs’ of English duo W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan’s comic ‘Savoy Operas’ of the late Victorian period.<sup>77</sup> MacDermot demonstrated, however, that ‘there is more to rock music than numbers with a thumping beat’.<sup>78</sup> His score offers ‘cooler numbers’ such as what Barnes called the ‘lovely Lennon and McCartney-like ballad, “Frank Mills”’.<sup>79</sup> *Punch*’s reviewer would later consider the most ‘ambitious’ of MacDermot’s songs to be “‘What a Piece of Work is Man”, Hamlet’s speech sung ... word for word to a setting of long and complex melodic phrases’.<sup>80</sup>

The dynamic variety within MacDermot’s relatively ‘conservative’ and conventionally tonal pop-rock score was perhaps central to *Hair*’s success. His music often reinforces the fractured, hectic and expletive-ridden nature of the text. During the ballads, however, and mid-tempo numbers such as ‘Good Morning

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<sup>75</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 27/10/2010.

<sup>76</sup> *The New York Times*, 29/04/1968.

<sup>77</sup> Two such examples of the ‘patter songs’ which punctuate all of Gilbert and Sullivan’s comic operas are ‘I am the very model of a modern Major-General’ (*The Pirates of Penzance*, 1879) and ‘Rising early in the Morning’ (*The Gondoliers*, 1889).

<sup>78</sup> *Punch*, 9/10/1968.

<sup>79</sup> *The New York Times*, 29/04/1968.

<sup>80</sup> *Punch*, 9/10/1968.

Starshine', simpler, predominantly acoustic arrangements provide a much-needed change of both dramatic pace and sheer volume.<sup>81</sup> In order that *Hair* reached an audience beyond merely the predominantly youthful market for 'hard' rock, such variety of dynamics (which is also apparent in *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, but less so in *Tommy*) was both commercially necessary and, for the audience, artistically rewarding. The subject matter, script and lyrics of *Hair* were shocking enough: an unremittingly 'hard rock' score might well, in 1967-8, have proved to be one challenge too many for mainstream audiences.

Indeed, while the script remained 'loose' and open to alteration during performance, even Butler was aware of the danger of the Broadway production being considered 'indecent'. This danger became real in 1969 when, 'on returning to the New York cast after playing Claude and Berger in the opening of the Los Angeles production, Rado and Ragni were dismissed as actors' for what Davis describes as 'embroidering their nudity and increasingly "graphic" miming of sex acts.'<sup>82</sup> Johnston explains that this unauthorized improvisation consisted primarily of Gerome Ragni as Berger performing an entire scene naked with 'a feather sticking out of his ass'.<sup>83</sup>

Although their acting contracts had been terminated, as playwrights they remained entitled to attend performances. Therefore, 'when they were finally barred from the Biltmore, Gerry and Jim threatened to cancel Michael Butler's rights to the show.'<sup>84</sup> *The New York Times* reported that the despondent authors now wished the show to close, because "'the management turns out to be our enemy ... That's the very thing we're writing about"'.<sup>85</sup> Harmony was, however, restored within a week. Butler invited Ragni, Rado and MacDermot to discuss the crisis 'at the home of a friend, Peter Yarrow, of "Peter, Paul and Mary", the folk singers.' Ellen Stewart, of Café LaMama, instead suggested to Ragni and Rado that she should mediate at a meeting in Central Park. There they 'resolved the

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<sup>81</sup> *Hair* script, p.83.

<sup>82</sup> Davis, *Letting Down*, p.211.

<sup>83</sup> Johnson, *Good Hair*, p.44.

<sup>84</sup> Davis, *Letting Down*, p.212.

<sup>85</sup> *The New York Times*, 12/04/1969, cited in *Ibid.*, p.211.

differences'.<sup>86</sup> Mary Davis notes that, ironically, while the most “objectionable” material’ was dropped, ‘much of the L.A. improv was eventually incorporated into the Broadway performance’.<sup>87</sup>

That Butler reacted so seriously to this discordant, if farcical, episode may have been a result of his experience the previous year in facing a more serious censorship challenge before he could produce *Hair* in London. Butler maintained, more than thirty years later, that ‘it’s important to understand that “Hair” was always under the constant watch of the authorities. There were those who were looking for any excuse to shut it down’.<sup>88</sup> In Britain in 1968 the Lord Chamberlain was still legally empowered – indeed obliged – to ensure that such a play never opened to a public audience. The next chapter considers the theatrical context of London into which *Hair* entered, and the process by which the Lord Chamberlain prevented its performance until he was relieved of his statutory duties.

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<sup>86</sup> Johnson, *Good Hair*, p.46.

<sup>87</sup> Davis, *Letting Down*, p.213.

<sup>88</sup> Butler, cited in Johnson, *Good Hair*, p.45.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### London Theatre during 'The Sixties', the Lord Chamberlain, and *Hair*

#### 4.1 What Was On in London?

Chapter Two considered the dominance of the 'authenticity' and 'rock' definition debates over music discourse and historiography. This chapter addresses the terms 'revolution' and 'experimental' which, likewise, pepper – and often smother – the historiography of British theatre in the second half of the twentieth century. The chapter suggests that this has skewed the historical picture of theatrical activity in London in the later 1960s and early 1970s. It then considers the treatment of *Hair* at the hands of the Lord Chamberlain.

The pivotal year of theatrical 'revolution' was, of course, 1956, by which time, as anyone with a passing knowledge of survey texts knows,

British theatre was in a terrible state. The West End was dominated by a few philistine theatre managers, cranking out emotionally repressed, middle-class plays, all set in drawing rooms with French windows, as vehicles for stars whose only talent was to wield a cigarette holder and a cocktail glass while wearing a dinner jacket.<sup>1</sup>

The 'boulevard theatre' of Noël Coward and Terrence Rattigan, reflecting only 'a tiny segment of society', reigned supreme until, at a stroke,

on 8 May 1956, came the breakthrough. At the Royal Court *Look Back in Anger*, John Osborne's fiery blast against the establishment burst onto the stage, radicalizing British theatre overnight ... A new wave of dramatists sprang up in Osborne's wake; planting their colours on British stages, speaking for a generation who had for so long been silent, they forged a living, adult, vital theatre.<sup>2</sup>

Dan Rebellato's crystallization of the mythic 'revolution' of *Look Back In Anger* opens the brilliant, forensic deconstruction of *1956 and All That*, in which he revises – thoroughly and dispassionately – that 'trite little account' which 'dominates virtually everything written on modern British theatre'.<sup>3</sup> Through examination of the Rock Operas in Britain, this thesis contributes to Rebellato's

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Rebellato, *1956 And All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.1-2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

necessary re-balancing of the over-polarized and reductive representation of post-1956 theatre.

The *avant-garde* within any historical period holds a particular appeal: discovering and defining the beginnings of something novel, whether in the fields of politics, society or cultural practice, is a common fascination. The risk of fetishizing the new or the obscure is, however, always present within any academic field which considers human behaviour. Repetition elevates movements or events of considerable significance – such as the *Look Back in Anger* or *Sgt. Pepper* moments – to incontrovertible ‘Year Zero’ status. Continuity and plurality are often, as most Counter-Culturalist accounts of ‘The Sixties’ demonstrate, less appealing, more amorphous, and more difficult to grasp and portray.

In their survey of devised theatre, Heddon and Milling recognize the pitfall of amplification through selection. They note that ‘the inclusion of particular examples’ renders them ‘by default, canonical’. Thus, ‘the citing of work results in further citing of work’ – and, by implication, the dismissal of work results in continued dismissal.<sup>4</sup> In an otherwise informative and accessible study which considers the USA and UK they then, however, parrot somewhat the pervasive mantra of ‘Sixties’ theatre history which acknowledges *Hair*, if at all, only to demean it. They praise Joan Littlewood’s *Oh! What a Lovely War* of 1963, noting that ‘this production, and several others from the Theatre Workshop, transferred into the West End, eliding the apparent boundaries between the fringe and mainstream venues’.<sup>5</sup> Of *Hair*, however, they state that ‘the “hippie” message of peace and love had become so commonplace that it had turned a show from Café La Mama into the smash-hit musical ... on Broadway’.<sup>6</sup> *Hair* was, by implication, riding on cultural coat-tails; what was already ‘commonplace’ ensured its success. As the previous and subsequent chapters suggest, however, *Hair* was a sincere and paramount example of ‘elision of boundaries’, the success of which was by no means guaranteed. Nonetheless, neither the Counter-Culturalists (as considered

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<sup>4</sup> Heddon and Milling, *Devising Performance*, pp.26-27.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.41.

in Chapter Six) nor general theatre historiography bestows any retrospective praise upon it, despite its enormous appeal to audiences – and many theatre critics and practitioners – between 1967 and 1973. Indeed, more damning dismissals of the Rock Operas than Heddon and Milling's are widespread.<sup>7</sup> Worst of all, for Glynn Wickham, *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* were 'calculated to appeal to audiences' emotions'.<sup>8</sup> The genre has, overtly or by implication, been repeatedly parenthesized as *not quite legitimate* theatre; denigrated as a deliberate commercial exploitation of the semiotics of the counter-culture, or disparaged as *ersatz* experimentalism.

The previous chapter outlined some key working methods, as applied to *Hair* by Tom O'Horgan, which differentiated the 'experimental' in the transatlantic theatre of the later 1960s. To that definition, and the option of incorporating music and dance, can be added the use of puppets, masks, film projection, and non-traditional performance spaces including cafes, pubs, the streets and the scenery-free 'empty' (or 'black box') studio space.<sup>9</sup> Above all,

emphasis on the live event, the cultural process ('performance', 'happening') rather than the fixed product was a central feature of much would-be revolutionary culture of the decade – which explains ... why live theatre, although not in the traditional 'proscenium arch' sense, became the paradigmatic form of the counter-culture.<sup>10</sup>

Where New York had led, London followed. A myriad of experimental companies and spaces were founded in the capital during the late 1960s. A selection of examples includes People Show, which came into being in 1966 to present their first performance in the basement of Better Books in Charing Cross Road. People Show fused into an ongoing troupe, initially under the leadership of Jeff Nuttall. They remain, in the twenty-first century, intensely proud of their status as 'the first

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<sup>7</sup> Examples include John Elsom, *Post-war British Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition, 1979), p.153; David Edgar, interviewed in *1968 – The Year of Revolutions: London*, BBC Radio Four, first broadcast 18/03/2008; John Russell Taylor, *The Penguin Dictionary of Theatre*, (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Glynn Wickham, *A History of the Theatre* (2nd edition), (London: Phaidon Press, 1992), p.253. Emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> Marwick, *The Sixties*, p.357.

<sup>10</sup> Stuart Laing, 'The politics of culture: institutional change', Moore-Gilbert and Seed, *Cultural Revolution?* p.90.

experimental theatre group in Britain'.<sup>11</sup> 1968 saw the opening, under Charles Marowitz, of The Open Space Theatre in Tottenham Court Road; the Arts Lab in Drury Lane under Jim Haynes; the Royal Court's experimental studio space The Theatre Upstairs, 'and Inter-Action (together with Theatrescope) opened the Ambiance Lunch Hour Theatre Club'.<sup>12</sup> Director Peter Brook's work for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) attracted extensive critical attention and his 1968 exposition of theatrical objectives, *The Empty Space*, was elevated instantly to canonical status.<sup>13</sup>

By 1969, the plethora of fringe and experimental groups included David Hare's overtly political and didactic – or 'agitprop' – Portable Theatre and Living Theatre was based at the Round House in Chalk Farm. An abandoned locomotive depot, the Round House was established as a performance space in 1964 for Centre 42 Theatre Company under playwright Arnold Wesker. It rapidly became a key experimental and counter-cultural venue (and that of *Godspell's* London debut).<sup>14</sup> Living Theatre, founded in New York in 1946 by Judith Malina and Julian Beck, presented the type of visceral, physical, non-linear, devised and partly improvised experimentalism which defied journalistic definition, leading the underground and mainstream press to describe such companies as an "'*avant-garde*, experimental theatre commune of underground hippies", or re-arrangements to that effect. This pioneering image', as John Elsom noted, 'was not resented by the companies themselves, for nobody dislikes being thought in the forefront of something'.<sup>15</sup>

'Experimental theatre, almost by definition, was', however, 'limited to tiny and usually elite audiences'. To focus upon it at the expense of the West End is to perpetuate a different distinction from the pop/rock music dichotomy; it de-emphasizes the theatre-going experiences of those who filled main-house theatres in their hundreds and thousands and over-amplifies that of the vanguardists who, in dozens or scores, patronized studio spaces. *Avant-garde*

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<sup>11</sup> On the early days of People Show see Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald Hayman, *British Theatre Since 1955: a Reassessment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) pp.157-158.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1968).

<sup>14</sup> Marwick, *The Sixties*, p.343.

<sup>15</sup> John Elsom, *Erotic Theatre* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1973), p.198.



theatre practitioners wanted, as much as any others, to attract larger audiences, but in that respect their endeavours – unlike *Hair* – did not succeed. Bernard Levin, for example, judged at the end of the decade that theatrical activity in the 1960s ‘became increasingly arcane, increasingly remote from the new audiences it professed to want so badly to reach’ yet ‘failed to persuade ... into the theatre’.<sup>16</sup> Moreover,

who were to compose this new audience was never unanimously agreed; for Arnold Wesker and his school it was to be the working classes; for Peter Brook and his it was to be those with a newly awakened political conscience about Vietnam and similar matters; for Tony Richardson and his it was to be the young.

As in any period of history, work was ‘of very varied quality’. Levin singles out *US*, devised and directed by Brook for the RSC in 1966 as ‘precious and dreary with didacticism’.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, he praises as ‘powerful and memorable’ David Halliwell’s *Little Malcolm and his Struggle against the Eunuchs*, directed by Mike Leigh for Unity Theatre Club in 1965 before transferring to the Garrick in the West End.<sup>18</sup> And, as before 1956 and as remains the case in the twenty-first century, it was the main houses of the West End that attracted the majority of London’s theatre-goers. The picture of theatrical activity in the capital as a whole in the late 1960s and early 1970s was, as Rebellato suggests, one of plurality, as confirmed by any edition of the weekly listings magazine *Time Out* (then firmly of counter-cultural bias and collective, ‘underground’ management style).

The week in which *Godspell* opened at the Round House in November 1971 provides a representative snapshot of London theatre.<sup>19</sup> In its ‘West End’ section, *Time Out* informed fans of musical theatre, for example, that they could see Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II’s *Show Boat* at the Adelphi or, at Her Majesty’s, *Ambassador*, based upon Henry James’ novel; the latter was, however, ‘sugary, banal and tedious’. Two major Shakespeare productions, of very different styles, were on offer: Jonathan Miller’s Victorian-dress *The Merchant of*

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<sup>16</sup> Levin, *Pendulum Years*, pp.352.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.352. Charles Marowitz reached strikingly similar conclusions about *US* at the Aldwych in his review which dominated the front page of the first edition of *IT*. *International Times*, No. 1, 14-27/10/1966.

<sup>18</sup> Levin, *Pendulum Years*, pp.352; *The Guardian*, 22/03/2006.

<sup>19</sup> *Time Out*, No. 90, 05-11/11/1971.

*Venice* with Laurence Olivier and Joan Plowright for the National Theatre at the Old Vic, and Peter Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Aldwych for the RSC. *Time Out* praised the 'genius' of 'Brook's brilliantly imaginative conception ... inspired by a Chinese circus', which 'created a new play without changing the text'. The largest subsidized companies were also presenting new work, with the RSC premiering Peter Hall's production of Harold Pinter's *Old Times* and the National Peter Nichols' 'not-to-be-missed' *The National Health*, directed by Michael Blakemore. At the Garrick, *Don't Just Like There, Say Something!* by Michael Pertwee was being presented by Britain's pre-eminent *farceur*, Brian Rix, and Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* had entered 'its nineteenth incredible year' at the Ambassadors theatre.<sup>20</sup> The type of work on offer in London confirms, therefore, *Variety* magazine's 1969 judgement 'there are still successful conventional shows ... to prove that it takes all sorts to make up a balanced legit program for a capital city'.<sup>21</sup>

Providing 'balance' in the same week of November 1971 were what *Time Out* listed as 'Fringe Shows'. The Open Space, for example, presented *Lay-By* by Howard Brenton, Brian Clark, Trevor Griffiths, David Hare, Stephen Poliakoff, Hugh Stoddart and Snoo Wilson, directed by Snoo Wilson for Portable Theatre. This work emerged after

seven writers got together with a press cutting about a 'rape' preceded by fellatio in a lay by. Each took off from that in a different direction – a serious courtroom demonstration with a huge pink dildo, a scene of the girl at work modelling for a porn photographer, the schoolmistress-observer being persecuted by kids in the playground, hospital orderlies washing the three dead protagonists down with blood.<sup>22</sup>

*Time Out* expressed reservations about *Lay-By*, but conceded that 'it's very witty and intelligent'. At the 'Poly Festival 3', Inter-Action offered three plays by Bernard Pomerance collectively entitled *High in Vietnam, Hot Damn*, and 'a two-hour participatory play on the English Civil War, mainly for kids' called *Revolution Workshop*. Simultaneously, the Oval House Theatre Club was presenting an adaptation of Franz Kafka's *The Trial* by the London Theatre Group. Under the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> *Variety*, 08/10/1969.

<sup>22</sup> *Time Out*, No. 90, 05-11/11/1971.

leadership of actor, playwright and director Steven Berkoff, the London Theatre Group had become a permanent ensemble using – in a description which could have been lifted from any Tom O’Horgan press release – ‘total theatre techniques’. *Time Out’s* ‘Workshops’ section listed opportunities for theatre practitioners to develop their techniques, ‘explore their art and expand their skills’. Inter-Action, for example, offered the opportunity of ‘working towards the creative independence of the individual in psychological and emotional terms within a group situation’: an impressive-sounding yet vague description which could describe any twenty-first century acting workshop and which would not, therefore, look out of place in a current edition of the now multi-million pound, global business enterprise which is *Time Out*.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, the mixed theatrical menu of small-scale, experimental work; new writing; Shakespeare; theatrical warhorses and escapist musicals presented by a range of commercial, state-subsidized and independent producers in November 1971 is strikingly similar to that on offer in London in the twenty-first century. Moreover, it confirms to a considerable degree the message of an essay by David Fairweather in the 1971 programme for *Hair* entitled ‘Re-enter the Well-Made Play’. Acknowledging the ‘considerable’ impact of *Look Back in Anger* in 1956, Fairweather asked, however, ‘where are they now, those Royal Courtiers?’ After ‘quite a long period’ when London ‘playgoers on the lookout for a solid play, with a beginning, middle and ending, had a very tough time of it’ and were most likely to experience productions featuring actors ‘sitting around in far from pregnant silences or uttering vague monosyllables’, the ‘well-made play’ was, in Fairweather’s judgement ‘with us once more’, and ‘in an ever increasing stream’.<sup>24</sup>

There were, however, ‘still exceptions’. As Fairweather noted, in late 1971 ‘sex-starved gentlemen’ were amongst those patronizing Kenneth Tynan’s ‘erotic review’ *Oh! Calcutta!* at the Royalty Theatre, and *Pyjama Tops*, a lecherous farce

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> David Fairweather, ‘Re-enter the Well-Made Play’, *Hair* Shaftesbury Theatre programme, 1971, The Museum of London.

presented at the Whitehall Theatre by Soho pornography king Paul Raymond.<sup>25</sup> Both of these shows reflected the brief but considerable appeal of stage nudity in the years immediately after the abolition of the Lord Chamberlain's powers of theatre censorship. Unlike *Hair*, however, *Oh! Calcutta!* and *Pyjama Tops* were predicated entirely upon the appeal of the gratuitously salacious.

In all other respects, when the work on show in the capital in November 1971 is considered as a whole, the two productions which emerge as the most strikingly original and resonant with the political and cultural concerns of the contemporary Western world are *Hair*, then in its third year at the Shaftesbury Theatre, and *Godspell*, newly-opened at the Round House. These two works – one a searing criticism of the foreign policy of the UK's most important global ally, the other the first production to embody Christ on the West End stage – elided, more than any others, the perceived boundaries between the 'experimental' and the 'mainstream'. Presentation of both was, moreover, possible only after the passage of the 1968 Theatres Act.

The historiography of the final years of what Roy Jenkins described as 'the fantastic position' of 'absolute censorship' by the Lord Chamberlain – 'a Court official who may exceptionally have an intelligent playgoer's knowledge of the stage but never has anything more' – has examined extensively the banning, prior to 1968, of sexual (particularly homosexual), violent and nude content.<sup>26</sup> Attention has also been paid to the political controversies caused by the satirising of Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in the *Beyond The Fringe* revue of 1960, and of the leading figures of the Labour Cabinet, the Prime Minister and his wife in *Mrs Wilson's Diary* of 1967.<sup>27</sup> The latter, based upon columns in the magazine *Private Eye* by Richard Ingrams and John Wells, 'dimmed', according to Jenkins, Harold Wilson's 'enthusiasm for stage freedom'. The Home Secretary feared in 1967 that the proposed Theatres Bill might fail; as had Bills which, in 1949 and 1962, had

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Roy Jenkins, *A Life at the Centre* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p.180.

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas De Jongh, *Politics, Prudery & Perversions: the Censoring of the English Stage 1901-1968* (London: Methuen, 2000) pp.5,12.

attempted to implement the 1909 recommendation of the Parliamentary Joint Select Committee to end pre-censorship of scripts.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, there had been a further, abortive attempt to reform the 1843 Theatres Act (which had consolidated the 1737 Licensing Act) when, in 1958, Conservative Home Secretary R.A.B Butler and the Lord Chamberlain, Lord Scarborough, had discussed the potential content of a Private Members Bill. On this occasion, ‘the primary concern was homosexuality on stage’ and, while legislation was not forthcoming, ‘there would now be some limited circumstances in which this would be acceptable’.<sup>29</sup> This tiny step towards liberalization should not, however, be over-estimated, nor should the declining numbers of plays refused a licence by Lord Scarborough between 1952 and 1963 or by his successor, the former Governor of the Bank of England Cameron (‘Kim’) Cobbold, who was ennobled as a hereditary Baron on his appointment as Lord Chamberlain. While Scarborough refused a licence to only thirty out of 10,219 scripts during his eleven-year tenure, and Cobbold eleven out of 4,405 between 1963 and 1968, ‘there was an increasing number during the decade before abolition where the Lord Chamberlain’s Office required significant alterations or cuts before granting a licence’, and of “waiting-box” plays, where the producer would not assent to the required alterations and was in dispute with the Lord Chamberlain’s Office’. As Andrew Holden has rightly concluded, ‘this masked the number of “banned” plays because they were often performed without a licence under the illegal but permitted loophole of the private theatre club’.<sup>30</sup> That option was, however, only practicable for a smaller venue which could declare itself a private club for the duration of a limited run. It was not possible for productions such as *Hair* which sought lengthy runs in large theatres. The subterfuge of the theatre club favoured, therefore, élite, not mass, theatre audiences.

In 1966 Lord Cobbold, having just refused a licence to the devotional play *Simple Golgotha* by Adamson for portrayal of the Deity, did, in principle, relax the blanket

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<sup>28</sup> Jenkins, *A Life*, pp.210-211; Holden, *Letting*, p.193.

<sup>29</sup> Holden, *Letting*, p.197.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.198-199.

ban which had, by convention, resulted in the use of ‘a bright light or a voice offstage’ to signify God or Jesus Christ.<sup>31</sup> The Lord Chamberlain’s change of heart came about after his play readers summarized for him in a lengthy memo the reasons which they believed had established – again merely by convention – absolute prohibition. These included ‘the likelihood’ that, ‘where plays are a source of profit ... other than religious motives’ could be involved, resulting in ‘a greater possibility of distortion to meet “popular” requirement’. The Lord Chamberlain was reminded that ‘the Christian Religion is ... supposed to be a truth established on revealed facts, and not a subject for fiction’. Moreover (as Chapters Eight and Twelve will consider) ‘distress of the religious’ could result from the inadequacy ‘in greater or lesser degree’ of any actor to ‘impersonate’ the ‘supernatural being’ of Christ. The casting of ‘actors of blemished life’ in the role of Christ was a matter of grave concern; this danger was, apparently, heightened within ‘the Commercial Theatre’, where such an eventuality was ‘quite possible’.<sup>32</sup>

Notably, a revue of religious censorship in 1966 in consultation ‘with the various Churches’ convinced Cobbold to lift the blanket prohibition when it emerged that ‘the ecclesiastical authorities ... no longer supported the ban’. Henceforth, ‘plays depicting Christ on the stage were considered individually and on their merits’. This had, however, no practical effect: notwithstanding the lifting of the blanket ban and the passage of the 1968 Act, no actor would portray the Deity on a West End stage until David Essex in *Godspell* in 1971, followed by Paul Nicholas in *Jesus Christ Superstar* in 1972. Indeed, regard to the ‘the advice of the 1909 Committee that stage plays should not “do violence to the sentiment of religious reverence”’ remained paramount prior to the passage of the Theatres Act.<sup>33</sup> In 1967, the Lord Chamberlain’s office found the use of the word ‘Jesus’ as an expletive in Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* “too blasphemous”. ‘Cheeses’ was, helpfully, suggested as a substitute.<sup>34</sup> Also in 1967 a long-forgotten play entitled *The Inheritance of the Just* was refused a licence for

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<sup>31</sup> John Johnston, *The Lord Chamberlain’s Blue Pencil* (Sevenoaks: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990), p.100.

<sup>32</sup> Cited in Dominic Shellard and Steve Nicholson with Miriam Handley, *The Lord Chamberlain Regrets...A History of British Theatre Censorship* (London: The British Library, 2004), pp.170-71.

<sup>33</sup> Johnston, *The Lord Chamberlain’s*, p.99.

<sup>34</sup> Cited in Paul O’Higgins, *Censorship in Britain* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1972), p.97.

portrayal of the Deity. Indeed, as the Lord Chamberlain's Assistant Comptroller Colonel John Johnston has noted, with some incredulity,

even as late as June 1968 the blue pencil was used on a play with a religious theme, namely *Car Cemetery* by Fernando Arrabal, ... [which] begins as a satire on suburban community living and ends in a blasphemous crucifixion scene on a bicycle ... It was staged in London in 1969 after the end of censorship.

Such instances left Johnston 'wondering', twenty years later, 'what good the ban ever did'.<sup>35</sup>

Lord Cobbold, however, believed in the right of the State to ban plays. The miniscule shifts towards liberalization hinted at over the decade prior to the 1968 Act should not be over-emphasized, nor should Jenkins' recounting that, although he was 'eight months away from the Home Office' by the time the Theatres Act was given the royal assent, 'Kim Cobbold ... always held me responsible, was touchingly grateful for being relieved of a distasteful task and continued frequently to thank me until his death in 1987'.<sup>36</sup> It was the relief of a *personal* burden for which the former Lord Chamberlain was grateful, not the new permissiveness of the Jenkins' 'liberal hour': Cobbold spoke in the House of Lords during the debates on the 1968 Theatres Act in favour of continued compulsory pre-censorship, 'albeit on reduced grounds, possibly overseen by the Chairman of the Arts Council'.<sup>37</sup> No example demonstrates more clearly than *Hair* the commitment of Cobbold (and most of his staff) to his duty as censor, even in its final months.

## 4.2 The Lord Chamberlain and *Hair*

In his otherwise in-depth studies, Dominic Shellard does not consider in detail the last months of theatre censorship.<sup>38</sup> This period was, as the correspondence files reveal, dominated by *Hair*. That the opening of *Hair* was delayed by several months – and would have been delayed indefinitely had not the Theatres Act been given the Royal Assent on 26 July 1968 – demonstrates the vigour with

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<sup>35</sup> Johnston, *The Lord Chamberlain's*, p.103.

<sup>36</sup> Jenkins, *A Life*, p.211.

<sup>37</sup> Johnston, *The Lord Chamberlain's*, p.232.

<sup>38</sup> Dominic Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Shellard and Nicholson with Handley, *Lord Chamberlain Regrets...*

which Lord Cobbold pursued his duties to the end. Shellard and Nicholson are, therefore, overly flippant in dismissing these final months as ‘the last gasp’ at the ‘fag end’ of theatre censorship. The implication is that, after the legal battles over the staging of such *causes célèbres* as, in 1965, Osborne’s *A Patriot for Me* and *Saved* by Edward Bond, *Hair* did not merit the taking up of arms.<sup>39</sup> This reading of events is perhaps justifiable if considering only the *legislative* case for the passing of the Theatres Act; which was, by the time of the Bill’s third reading on 19 July, finally won. A close examination of the *Hair* files, however, flatly contradicts the conclusion that ‘all concerned with censorship knew that the game was up’ early in 1968.<sup>40</sup>

That *Hair* was the final play under scrutiny as censorship was being abolished is too easily dismissed as an interesting historical footnote of negligible cultural consequence. Instead, it should be borne in mind that had the Theatres Act *not* come into force on 26 September 1968 – and until such time as it did – *Hair* could not have opened to a ticket-buying theatre audience in Britain in any form recognisable to its authors because the United Kingdom – in common, of non-Communist Western states, only with Spain under General Franco – retained a system of pre-censorship of scripts.<sup>41</sup> Nicholas De Jongh’s simple, factual statement reminds us of the power of censorship wielded by an unelected, minor member of the Royal Household as recently as 1968: ‘Cobbold banned three different versions of the musical in the last few months of the Lord Chamberlain’s power’.<sup>42</sup>

It is perhaps inevitable that the opening of *Hair* in London should be remembered primarily for providing ‘confirmation that the naked frontier had finally been passed’. The distinguished *Guardian* theatre critic Michael Billington reminded his readers in 2007 that the stage nudity of *Hair* was not, however, a first for London theatre as a whole. He recalls that

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<sup>39</sup> On *A Patriot For Me* and *Saved* see Shellard, *British Theatre*, pp.138-140; 140-146.

<sup>40</sup> Shellard and Nicholson with Handley, *Lord Chamberlain Regrets...* pp.173-4.

<sup>41</sup> Holden, *Letting*, p.216. The Franco regime moved swiftly to close a 1970 production of *Hair* in Madrid. *The Daily Telegraph*, 05/08/1970.

<sup>42</sup> De Jongh, *Politics, Prudery*, p.239.



everything radically changed in 1968, the 'year of revolutions' ... Suddenly, nudity became both a defiant political gesture and a symbol of sexual liberation. That year, although the [Theatres] act didn't become law until September, the Royal Shakespeare Company jumped the gun in June. Maggie Wright became the first person to appear mobile and naked on the legit stage when she played Helen of Troy in Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* ... without causing outbreaks of lust in young spectators such as myself ... However, a breakthrough had been achieved.

Almost forty years later, Billington stresses that 'what is astonishing, looking back, is how relatively recent stage nudity is'.<sup>43</sup> That a blind eye should have been turned to this breach of the Licensing Act was, however, perhaps due to the élite nature of both Marlowe's classical text (which was not, of course, subject to the Lord Chamberlain's censorship) and the Royal Shakespeare Company's audiences. It was *Hair* which would capitalize on this breakthrough to provide a more audacious first within the longer-running and far better attended commercial theatre sector.

While nudity attracted the greatest amount of publicity before *Hair*'s London run, it was not the issue which provoked the greatest outrage within the Lord Chamberlain's Office. Nudity was not Lord Cobbold's primary concern because his Office simply would not allow it. What caused greater alarm was the 'dangerously permissive' nature of the piece as a whole. In the eyes of the Lord Chamberlain's Office, *Hair* contained a political message which (despite disavowal of the piece by many Counter-Culturalists), tallied with many of the oppositional and revolutionary concerns of the broadly-defined counter-culture. Indeed, examination of the debate provoked amongst the Lord Chamberlain's own staff reveals a microcosm of the many shadings of opinion in British society over the entire 'permissive' agenda of the Jenkins-Wilson-Callaghan 'liberal hour'.

Submission of *Hair* to the Lord Chamberlain's scrutiny began with an initially innocuous standard letter from theatrical producer Harold Fielding. Enclosing 'our cheque in the sum of £2. 7. 0d', Fielding looked forward to receiving a 'copy of the script returned to us with your official stamp,' thus allowing him to proceed with a

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Billington, 'Taboo or not taboo?', *The Guardian*, 15/02/2007.

production at the Saville Theatre 'at an early date'. An established theatrical producer, Fielding then audaciously combined coyness with tactical enlistment of public, critical support: 'We realise the script has many unusual features, but its public production in New York has been acclaimed by the critics including Mr. Alan Brien who has written a most laudatory notice in the London Sunday Times.'<sup>44</sup> A marginal note records that Fielding was 'warned by telephone there will be a delay'.<sup>45</sup>

This delay may, in part, have been provoked by the first, positive Reader's Report for Lord Cobbold, in which T.B. Harward endorsed the work as a whole and recommended it for a performance licence; on the basis, however, of many cuts. Timothy Harward had been appointed an Examiner of Plays in 1965: he would be the last of just 21 such Examiners employed between 1737 and 1968. With a university background in literature and theatre, and having spent six years in the army before becoming a freelance theatre journalist for the *Irish Times*, Harward was a lecturer at Regent Street Polytechnic when he was 'surprised to be asked to be a Reader'. Although excited by 'a unique opportunity for somebody like me who was fascinated by the theatre', he later described his period with the Lord Chamberlain's Office as 'a curious but rewarding episode; a sort of minor time warp in history'.<sup>46</sup>

Towards the end of that 'time warp', Harward summarized, perceptively and sympathetically, both the amorphous 'plot' of *Hair* and the stated intentions of its authors. Describing *Hair* to Lord Cobbold as 'less a musical play than a 'happening', Harward then reported the authors' own, submitted description of it as 'a group-tribal activity. An extension of what's happening. A coming-together for a common reason: a search for a way of life that makes sense to the young, that allows the growth of their new vision, however defined or undefined that may be; to find an alternative to the unacceptable standards, goals and morals of the older generation, the establishment'.

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<sup>44</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 28/04/1968.

<sup>45</sup> Harold Fielding Ltd., letter to Lord Cobbold, 10/05/1968, Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence file LR 1968/2 HAIR, The British Library.

<sup>46</sup> Johnston, *The Lord Chamberlain's*, pp.124-5, 265.

He recognized that

There is no real plot. The only development in the play is that Claude, one of the 'tribe' of youngsters who comprise the cast, is drafted for Vietnam and symbolically killed. Before this happens he and his friends generally express their disgust at the American Establishment, the uncomprehending older generation, and preach free love, drug taking and universal harmony.

Harward then presented a vigorous case in support of *Hair*, the script having left him in no doubt that

it is essentially serious in its intention, trying to persuade the audience to understand what the psychedelic movement is all about; it is not a vicious play – though some of the business and language will certainly cause offence ... the form is loose and the action freewheeling in order to try and involve the audience and 'turn them on': the authors are after total effect.<sup>47</sup>

Harward was satisfied that, while 'there will be a temptation to ad-lib ... provided the performance is controlled and attention paid to the passages noted ... then it is recommended that this real and current point of view should be allowed expression.' Indeed, his superior, Assistant Comptroller Johnston, over-turned some of Harward's specific textual objections. For example, of 'Claud [*sic*] "(...removes his lipstick)"' Harward notes: 'Attention stage directions. The significance of the lipstick is not clear from the previous speeches. He is not shown to be homosexual.' Johnston over-rules him, writing 'leave'.<sup>48</sup>

In response to Harward and Johnston's liberal – or pragmatic – tolerance, a handwritten memo conveys the vociferous objections of another reader, whom De Jongh has indentified as Ronald Hill.<sup>49</sup> His contribution was not an official Reader's Report, as Hill was Assistant Secretary to the Lord Chamberlain's Office and not an Examiner of Plays. However, the duty often fell to him of attending performances of controversial scripts to ensure that cuts and alterations imposed by the Lord Chamberlain's Office were subsequently adhered to in production.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps anticipating such an eventuality, Hill seems to have felt compelled to record that

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<sup>47</sup> T.B. Harward, Reader's Report, 18/05/1968, LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> De Jongh, *Politics, Prudery*, p.239.

<sup>50</sup> Johnston, *Lord Chamberlain's*, pp.191, 214, 228.

I ... of course agree the suggested cuts, but I would go further. This is a demoralising play. It extols dirt, anti-establishment views, homosexuality and free love, drug taking, and it inveighs against patriotism. We are in a school of morals, and so far as philosophies whether anti-establishment or flower power go, only alternative philosophies provide a remedy [*sic*]. But drug taking in this country, which did not exist as a problem 10 years ago, is almost solely due to the influence originally of United States theatrical and 'pop' elements, and now by their offshoots here. Teen-age drug taking is a growing problem and I would remorselessly delete every reference and 'business' relating to drugs – going on trips and so on. Naturally in view of the [*Sunday Times*] article we should have to put a blanket prohibition over undress male and female. Some other parts also want careful thought – Claude for example is a man yet he sings of his tits and his 'ass' and he has 'bad times' like a woman. Presumably a roaring pansy. I should be loathe, personally to commit myself to any degree over this play.<sup>51</sup>

Johnston chose to familiarize himself with Brien's fulsome praise of *Hair*, which highlighted the ongoing realities of British theatre censorship:

Tomorrow evening, on Broadway, there opens a show which could not conceivably be presented on any British stage. Our taboo-ridden, body-representing, swearword-worried theatre will be poorer for its self-denial. 'Hair' ... is the most refreshing, original and maverick entertainment I have seen here since 'West Side Story'. The finale of the first act may prove too much even for some shockproof New Yorkers when it arrives. As a rather touchingly sweet and naive song called 'Where Do I Go?' dies on a fall in the half-light, five noticeably virile and well-endowed young men emerge from under a communal blanket and stand, totally naked, fronting the audience ... Three or four (my eyes were too busy to count) beautifully sculpted young girls also appear, proudly bare to the navel, while another stands, uncovered from head to heel, in half profile ... A large, attractive, cheerful and tireless cast, of all sexes and colours, slip in and out of roles as adroitly as they slip in and out of bed.<sup>52</sup>

Having apparently recognized within Brien's article a powerful case for allowing the piece, Johnston attempted to persuade Lord Cobbold:

This play is a little bit risky if the attached review is anything to go by ... The stage directions are pretty comprehensive, but there is nothing at the end of Act I in the script on the lines Brien mentions. As we are dealing with a reasonably reputable organisation, I think we would be justified in asking for an insurance that you will only license this play on the understanding that there is no ad-libbing and no nudity, giving our reason for asking for this assurance. They have read the Brien article too!<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL

<sup>52</sup> Johnston, Memo to Miss Fischer, 23/05/1968, LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL; *The Sunday Times*, 28/05/1968.

<sup>53</sup> Johnston, Memo to Cobbold, 27/05/1968, LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL.

Surprisingly, a Licence for *Hair* was prepared; presumably by Johnston. Concluding: 'Given under my hand this ... day of ... 1968. Lord Chamberlain. To The Manager of the Saville Theatre, London', it awaited merely the insertion of day, month and Cobbold's signature. What could have been the final Play Licence to be issued read:

I, the Lord Chamberlain of the Queen's Household for the time being, do by virtue of my Office ... Allow the Performance of a new Stage Play, of which a copy has been submitted to me by you, being a play in 2 Acts, entitled 'Hair' with the exception of all Words and Passages which are specified in the endorsement of this Licence and without any further variations whatsoever.

The regulatory clauses on the back of Licence, however, ensured that Cobbold's signature would never be forthcoming:

Mem. The particular attention of the Management is called to the following Regulations, which refer to all Stage Plays licenced by the Lord Chamberlain. The strict observance of these Regulations is to be considered as the condition upon which the Licence is signed.

... No profanity or impropriety of language to be permitted on the Stage.

No indecency of dress, dance, or gesture to be permitted on the Stage.

No objectionable personalities to be permitted on the Stage, nor anything calculated to produce riot or breach of the peace.

No offensive representations of living persons to be permitted on the Stage.<sup>54</sup>

The Lord Chamberlain's correspondence files contain no formal record of Cobbold's first rejection of *Hair*. This decision is, however, confirmed by the prompt re-submission of a revised script by a new producer, James Verner.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the change of London producer occurred precisely because, as Harold Fielding Ltd informed Johnston, Michael Butler, in New York, would not acquiesce to Cobbold's requirements to bowdlerise the script:

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<sup>54</sup> Play Licence for *Hair*, undated and unsigned, LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL

<sup>55</sup> Letter from John Barber, Director, for James Verner Ltd to 'The Comptroller', 04/06/1968, LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL

we had some urgent discussions with our associates and made certain recommendations which, in the light of your comments, seemed to us essential if an acceptable script were to be achieved for a London production. As we could not achieve agreement on many vital points, Mr. Fielding and Mr. Delfont have decided not to proceed further, and accordingly we would ask you to accept withdrawal of our application for a licence to present the play at the Saville Theatre.<sup>56</sup>

C.D. Herriot produced a new Reader's Report on the 'Second presentation by a different Management'. Charles Herriot – described, aptly, by De Jongh as 'the indefatigable' – was by far the longest-serving of the three incumbent Examiners of Plays; indeed, he would become the fourth-longest serving of the 21 throughout the 230-year history of the office.<sup>57</sup> Appointed in 1937, former actor and producer Herriot had, in 1958, become Senior Examiner.<sup>58</sup> His opinion of the revised version of *Hair*, with the intended 'Place of Production' now the Shaftesbury Theatre and the proposed opening date 17 July 1968, was characteristically blunt:

This script is more or less the same as the previous one ... It still seems to be a totally reprehensible affair. Satire is one thing, but the 'knocking' at every convention and the tacit glorification of drugs and general intransigence inclines me to agree with Mr Hill that, in effect, this piece is dangerously permissive. For my part, therefore, this piece is NOT RECOMMENDED FOR LICENCE.<sup>59</sup>

Herriot's conclusion is capitalized in red ink – the most emphatic form of typeface available on a manual typewriter – and lends credence to De Jongh's statement that 'to suggest at the closing-point of the Lord Chamberlain's regime that a script should be banned because of its anti-establishment convictions reveals how close to totalitarianism the Chamberlain's censorship could sway'.<sup>60</sup>

Herriot made 36 textual objections, 16 of which were over-ruled by Johnston. Some of Herriot's objections are a result of over-zealous textual misreadings or simple lack of comprehension. They included: 'p.14 "The Tribe dances the Kama Sutra" A dance based on this celebrated sexual text-book can only be obscene.'

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<sup>56</sup> Ian Bevan for Harold Fielding Ltd., letter to Colonel Johnston, 11/06/1968, LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL

<sup>57</sup> Shellard and Nicholson with Handley, *Lord Chamberlain Regrets...*p. 174.

<sup>58</sup> Johnston, *Lord Chamberlain's*, pp. 123, 125.

<sup>59</sup> C.D. Herriot, Reader's Report on 'Second presentation by a different Management', 10/06/1968, LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL.

<sup>60</sup> De Jongh, *Politics, Prudery*, p.239.

Johnston's marginal note reads 'ask for details'. 'p.21 "...one for Prince Philip", to which Johnston agreed, marking 'Alter'. 'p.41 "...with my girlfriend" ? Lesbian indication.' Johnston understood that this reading, in the context of the naïve, heterosexual, adolescent love song 'Frank Mills', was ridiculous. He marked 'Leave', as he did with two of Herriot's uncomprehending observations: 'll p.2 "freaked them out" I don't understand this', and 'll p.7. "joints". I think these are marijuhana [*sic*] cigarettes'.<sup>61</sup>

Herriot also enlisted the support of both the author of *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) and a colleague to object to a list of what he saw as aberrant sexual practices: 'p.5 "Sodomy, Fellatio, Cunnilingus, Pederasty" (for details see Kraft Ebbing or our Mr. Hill)'.<sup>62</sup> In this instance, Johnston concurred; without, it would seem, the need to draw upon Hill's apparent knowledge of these subjects. It is indeed impossible to see how the Lord Chamberlain could have allowed these lines to be performed. The context, however, reveals how complex and, at times, dramaturgically ridiculous the process of censorship could be. These lines open the very short song 'Sodomy', during which the character of Woof celebrates a wide variety of forms of sexual activity:

Sodomy  
Fellatio  
Cunnilingus  
Pederasty  
Father  
Why do these words sound so nasty?  
Masturbation  
Can be fun  
Join the holy orgy  
Kama Sutra ev'ryone<sup>63</sup>

Such 'revelling in a joyful clutch of sexual freedoms, whether straight, gay or both' undoubtedly 'sang anthems of permissiveness and dissent'.<sup>64</sup> Cutting this song would, however, have excised the exposition of Woof's character and, as a result, the dramatic function of his character within the play. The Lord Chamberlain's

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<sup>61</sup> Herriot, Readers's Report, 10/06/1968, LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> *Hair* script, p.10

<sup>64</sup> De Jongh, *Politics, Prudery*, p.238.

censorship was revealed, therefore, as more than the mere ‘trimming’ of a few ‘offensive’ words or actions. Its impact upon the dramatic coherence of any play – even one such as *Hair* which revels in what sometimes appears to be incoherence – could be profound. One can, therefore, understand the artistic reasons for Butler, Ragni and Rado’s refusal to allow *Hair* to be edited. To have done so would not only have signalled a surrender in the battle for ‘permissiveness’; it would have rendered the script and the production unrecognisable, even incomprehensible.

Johnston, however, was sincere in his desire to find a compromise which could allow the play to be licensed. Again, he attempted to persuade Cobbold:

Mr Herriot ... does not recommend it for licence for the reasons he gives, and which are shared by Mr Hill. I have already suggested that I do not think this play should be banned on the grounds that it will encourage young people to take drugs. I have marked the suggested cuts, and as with the earlier version the stage directions will need very careful watching ... If you are prepared to consider a licence I suggest that we send a list of cuts and in view of the New York production warn them that there can be no nudity or ad-libbing.<sup>65</sup>

Cobbold provided a curt, handwritten response: ‘For reasons I have explained, I prefer to refuse licence.’ The dutiful Johnston immediately asked his secretary to ‘Please write the usual letter saying “No”’.<sup>66</sup>

The next day, however, she reported that ‘Mr. Verner and Mr. Conyers (production) would like an appointment to discuss HAIR with you’.<sup>67</sup> Johnston summarized this meeting in order to try every means, again unsuccessfully, to persuade Cobbold. Johnston reported the producers’ opinion that ‘the play was a very beautiful one, the theme of which was “love”.’ The *Hair* management had further pleaded that ‘the play was quite uncorrupting’ because ‘when played on the stage the text was put over satirically or often was burlesqued in such a way as to destroy all the glamour of, for example, drug taking’. Johnston, however, ‘did no more than reiterate that the play in the Lord Chamberlain’s view was

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<sup>65</sup> Johnston, Memo to Lord Chamberlain, 11/06/1968. LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL

<sup>66</sup> Johnston, Memo to Miss Fischer, 18/06/1968. LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL.

<sup>67</sup> Miss Fischer, Memo to Johnston, 19/06/1968. LR 1968/2 HAIR BL.



permeated with ideals that were quite unacceptable'.<sup>68</sup> Johnston now foresaw three possible reactions from Conyers in response to Cobbold's implacable opposition to *Hair*:

1. Try us with another script. I said he could do this, but I was a bit pessimistic as to the outcome.
2. Postpone production [until] under the new Act.
3. Put it on in July as planned and risk the consequences.<sup>69</sup>

De Jongh has concluded that, in light of his record of previous decisions, 'Cobbold's personal reaction to the script' – that it was 'unacceptable' and 'too controversial for British audiences' – 'was characteristic. The musical's Vietnam war-dodgers, its flower-power, its hirsute hippies joyfully ... succumbing to whatever drugs came to mouth or mind ... celebrated everything the Lord Chamberlain's censorship abhorred'.<sup>70</sup>

The producers opted to proceed in the third, defiant manner predicted by Johnston. Consequently, Ronald Hill sent Johnston a *Sunday Times* advertisement which – using Alan Brien's 'recommendation' of 'a show that could not conceivably be produced on any British Stage' – announced that bookings were being taken from an opening date of Monday 29 July. Accordingly, Hill, suggested that

we should ... consider what our action should be if the producers decide to ignore the law, and if action is to be taken we ought to make sure of getting tickets for early performances so that we are in a position to provide evidence ... At some stage too, we must formally warn the licensee of the Shaftesbury that this play has been disallowed.<sup>71</sup>

Johnston promptly informed Cobbold, who instructed him to contact Mr T. Cracknell, the Manager and, hence, Licensee of the Shaftesbury Theatre.<sup>72</sup> 'Mr Cracknell ... seemed grateful that I did. He didn't know the situation – the

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<sup>68</sup> Johnston, Memo to Lord Chamberlain, 25/06/1968. LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL.

<sup>69</sup> Johnston, Memo to R.H. [Ronald Hill] 27/06/1968. LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL.

<sup>70</sup> De Jongh, *Politics, Prudery*, p.238.

<sup>71</sup> Hill, Memo to Johnston, undated. LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL.

<sup>72</sup> Johnston, Memo to Cobbold, 2/06/1968. LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL. As Johnston later explained, the 1843 Theatres Act placed two obligations upon the Lord Chamberlain: 'Not only was he the censor of plays but it was his duty to license the London theatres and a few others as well.' Johnston, *Lord Chamberlain's*, p.16

Producers tell him they are waiting to hear. I put him in the picture. He says their contract is conditional on the play being licensed'.<sup>73</sup>

As a result, the press reported – amidst a tangle of 'Hair' puns – that 'the opening at the Shaftesbury Theatre on July 29 has been postponed for two months' because 'the Broadway Hippie Musical *Hair*, in which men and women face the audience naked, has been turned down by the Lord Chamberlain'.<sup>74</sup> By then, theatre censorship was 'likely to have ended, but the London management for the musical took great pains yesterday not to give the impression that this alone was the reason for the delay'. James Verner apparently claimed to 'have always believed' that *Hair* would be licensed. He saw 'nothing objectionable in it. It is a great, big, happy laughing show and we don't think the Lord Chamberlain or anyone else could find anything wrong in that'.<sup>75</sup> Reporting that the 'stage censor has not only cut "Hair" ... but completely scalped it', *The Sun* considered that 'this delay adds a piece of high comedy to the situation between the "Hair" management and the Lord Chamberlain because the Royal Assent to a Bill abolishing his blue-pencilled reign is scheduled before Parliament rises at the end of this month'. Verner is again quoted, this time stating Cobbold's position more accurately: 'He found it completely unacceptable, full stop. We have since submitted another script and are still talking to him about his total rejection of the play'.<sup>76</sup>

With the proposed opening now delayed until 1 October 1968, Verner's company had indeed presented a third, revised version to Cobbold's office.<sup>77</sup> This necessitated a Third Reader's Report, in which Herriot considered it 'a curiously half-hearted attempt to vet the script' and remained adamant that 'there are still a lot of cuts to be made'. Herriot now, however, changed his mind and recommended *Hair* for licence 'providing that we can depend on this script being

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<sup>73</sup> Johnston, Memo to Hill, 04/07/1968. LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL.

<sup>74</sup> 'Receding Hair', *Daily Mail*, 12/07/1968.

<sup>75</sup> 'Opening of Hair Put Back', *The Daily Telegraph*, 12/07/1968.

<sup>76</sup> 'Censor Scalps Hair', *The Sun*, 12/07/1968.

<sup>77</sup> John Barber, director of James Verner Ltd, letter to Cobbold, 09/07/1968. LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL

followed'.<sup>78</sup> Only at this late stage, with the Theatres Bill progressing through Parliament, did the Lord Chamberlain begin to yield. Johnston pleaded once more: 'it has been toned down quite a lot. I find it difficult to recommend that the play be turned down out of hand ... The big question is if you do licence an acceptable version, can these people be trusted to stick to the script? At last the Lord Chamberlain began to relent, stating, in a handwritten response: 'I think this is about right'. However, this sudden shift in position was, one suspects, as much due to Cobbold's awareness of the progress of the Bill as to any change of heart regarding *Hair*. He instructed Johnston to 'keep it until next week' when he would 'be able to give you a better idea of dates'.<sup>79</sup>

Johnston's relief at the resolution of the situation finally being taken out of his hands is tangible. On 24 July he 'discussed again with Mr Verner today. Their present plans are to open on September 26<sup>th</sup>, which if all goes according to plan will be the first day when the new Theatres Bill is in force! We decided therefore to go into no detail regarding possible cuts until after Friday, when the Royal Assent is expected'.<sup>80</sup> The Lord Chamberlain hinted, at last, that he shared Johnston's relief. Cobbold's usual acknowledgement of a memo – a small, handwritten 'c', sometimes accompanied by 'L/C' – is, on this occasion, very noticeably replaced with a much larger, more flamboyant 'C'.

Colonel J.F.D Johnston brought the era of the Lord Chamberlain's writ over theatre licensing to an end on 30 July 1968. A final letter from the producers had informed him 'that the first performance at the Shaftesbury Theatre will be on Thursday September 26<sup>th</sup>, 1968'.<sup>81</sup> The dutiful Johnston replied with his customary courtesy, closing the files of the Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence relating to Plays thus: 'in accordance with the Theatres Act 1968, which has now received the Royal Assent, new plays for production on or after September 26<sup>th</sup>, 1968, do not require to be allowed by the Lord Chamberlain'.<sup>82</sup> There is no record

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<sup>78</sup> C.D. Herriot, Third Reader's Report, 11/07/1968. LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL

<sup>79</sup> Johnston, Memo to Cobbold, 15/07/1968. LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL.

<sup>80</sup> Johnston, Memo to Cobbold, 24/07/1968. LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL.

<sup>81</sup> John Barber, director of James Verner Ltd., letter to The Comptroller, 29/07/1968. LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL.

<sup>82</sup> Johnston, letter to 'John Barber, Esq.' of James Verner Ltd., 30/07/1968. LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL.

of whether Johnston ever attended a performance of *Hair*. Nor, indeed, is it known whether the Lord Chamberlain saw the piece which he had prevented from being staged in his final months as Britain's theatre censor. His duties of censorship had endured since 1737 and, as this chapter has demonstrated, were pursued vigorously to the very end. Michael Billington's conclusion, with the benefit of four decades of hindsight, is, therefore, both succinct and apt: 'what is astonishing is that we tolerated his tyranny for so long'.<sup>83</sup> The next chapter addresses Shellard's statement that the effect of *Hair* in London 'at the time should not be undervalued' and considers why, 'after decades of heavy-handed repression', it was regarded by vast audiences, numerous theatre critics and 'many theatre professionals as a revelation'.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *The Guardian*, 14/04/2010.

<sup>84</sup> Shellard, *British Theatre*, p.147.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Hair* in London: Production, performance and reception

The same core, creative team behind the Broadway production finally brought *Hair* to the London stage on 26 September 1968. Bertrand Castelli was, as in New York, Executive Producer. Robert Stigwood, David Conyers and John Nasht were billed as Producers, alongside Michael Butler. Herbert Sidon re-created Nancy Potts' costume designs, Robin Wright his own scenic design, and Jules Fisher reproduced his lighting design. Dance Director Julie Arenal and Director Tom O'Horgan brought their by now well-developed rehearsal and staging techniques to an overwhelmingly British cast led by Paul Nicholas (Claude), Oliver Tobias (Berger), Annabel Leventon (Sheila) and Michael Feast (Woof).<sup>1</sup> Nicholas has recalled that, as in his Broadway production, O'Horgan 'tried to breed a spirit within the cast, with Actors Studio kinds of exercises to help free us from inhibitions'. The young Nicholas, making his stage debut, was first shown to the stage of the Shaftesbury Theatre by an equally inexperienced Assistant Stage Manager called Cameron Mackintosh.<sup>2</sup>

Other notable members of the London company before the end of 1968 included Sonja Kristina, who, within a year, would form the critically-acclaimed progressive-rock band Curved Air; Marsha Hunt, who, in 1970, gave birth to Mick Jagger's daughter, Karis, and a young actress called Elaine Paige.<sup>3</sup> Paige won her first West End role (as a Tribe member and understudy to Annabel Leventon as Sheila) only after eight auditions. She would become, a decade later, an 'overnight success' in the title role of the 1978 world premiere production of *Evita* by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber. *Evita*, about the life of Eva Perón (1919-1952), wife of the President of Argentina Juan Perón, would be Rice and Lloyd Webber's first work together after *Jesus Christ Superstar*, in which Paige would also be a chorus member.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Hair*, Shaftesbury Theatre programme, dated 23/11/1968, The Museum of London.

<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, 29/03/2010.

<sup>3</sup> *Hair*, Shaftesbury Theatre programme, 23/11/1968, Museum of London.

<sup>4</sup> Elaine Paige, *Memory: Celebrating 40 Years in the Theatre* (London: Oberon Books, 2008), p.23.

The critical reception of the London and national press within the first weeks of *Hair*'s opening was overwhelmingly positive. Examination of these reviews suggests that Kevin D'Arcy's claim in the *The Sunday Telegraph* three days after the premiere that 'on the morning after the first night ... only three out of nine [reviewers] gave the musical enthusiastic reviews' was an inaccurate conclusion, or one based upon an unrepresentative local sample. Indeed, in the same edition of *The Sunday Telegraph*, theatre critic Frank Marcus, after reminding his readers that 'last week, a performance of this show would have been impossible' due to 'the ignominy of stage censorship', celebrated the opening of *Hair* as the moment when 'at long last the London theatre has burst into flame'.<sup>5</sup> Irving Wardle of *The Times* was, likewise, in no doubt that *Hair* marked a theatrical paradigm shift. It was

a prototype. Nothing else remotely like it has yet struck the West End. As a musical it is utterly remote from the values and formulae of orthodox show business ... The combination of a relentless rock beat and the inventiveness of the direction provides ... a potent theatrical language drawn from the freedom of spontaneous dance ... Its move from off-off-Broadway to Broadway and now across the Atlantic has in no way compromised its integrity; and its honesty and passion give it the quality of a true theatrical celebration.<sup>6</sup>

Wilfred De'ath similarly heralded the arrival of a new, hybrid, theatrical sub-genre. He acknowledged the show's debt to, and departure from, theatrical tradition:

*Hair* seemed to me, more than any show I have seen, to fulfil the basic requirement of a good musical, namely that the music, the love-rock beat in this case, is kept up non-stop, and that the appallingly banal snatches of dialogue, which are meant to help the plot along and which are a speciality of American musicals (remember *Oklahoma!* and, even, *West Side Story?*), are kept to an absolute minimum.

As a result, 'a genuine pop opera has evolved'.<sup>7</sup> Harold Hobson, arguably the most influential London theatre critic of the day, was also won over by the piece and its performers, whose 'conquering charm' he observed 'enveloping all'. Like Marcus, Hobson was delighted that 'the actor-audience barrier is physically breached too' as the cast's

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<sup>5</sup> *The Sunday Telegraph*, 29/09/1968.

<sup>6</sup> *The Times*, 28/09/1968.

<sup>7</sup> *The Illustrated London News*, 12/10/1968.

swinging bodies fly over the footlights perilously close to the audience's heads ... At any moment one is liable to be shaken warmly by the hand, or as warmly embraced, not roughly, not inconsiderately, but with a marvellous, easy courtesy, by some genial member of this happy throng.<sup>8</sup>

Hobson and De'ath concurred with Wardle's conclusion that 'the unmistakable purpose of the show ... is to send up a great hymn to freedom and love; and for once the message really comes across'. All agreed with Marcus that *Hair* was an important cultural text which 'documents with complete honesty what it felt like to be alive and young ... at a certain moment in history'. 'The show is', Marcus concluded, 'in every sense of the word, sensational.'<sup>9</sup>

*The New York Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* noted, however, the presence of a small number of dissenting voices. Amongst the audience 'there must have been some squares too. From the back of the balcony repeated shouts of "Rubbish" sounded throughout the performance.' These 'squares' gave voice to the opinion of *The Daily Telegraph's* 78-year old correspondent, W.A. Darlington, whose review of *Hair* was his last before retiring after 48 years as a theatre critic. His response to *Hair* seemed to mark a generational shift of which Darlington was, himself, aware: 'He said he had "tried hard," but found the evening "a complete bore – noisy, ugly and quite desperately funny"'.<sup>10</sup>

The headline of Wardle's *Times* review, 'Plenty to alarm unwary in hymn to freedom', misrepresented, however, the reaction of the majority of the audience and critics. While Wardle noted that 'there is plenty of blasphemy, perversion, and other material taboo until yesterday, to alarm unwary customers', his subjective response, like that of *The Guardian's* Philip Hope-Wallace, was that the show contained 'nothing to make hair stand on end'.<sup>11</sup> This was despite a final blaze of eve-of-production publicity in which

the cast of the West End production *Hair* decided not to perform the nude scene from the play for the Eamonn Andrews show on Independent Television last night. Mr. Tom O'Horgan, the director, said that he and

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<sup>8</sup> *The Sunday Telegraph*, 29/09/1968; *Evening Standard*, 28/09/1968.

<sup>9</sup> *The Sunday Telegraph*, 29/09/1968.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in *The New York Times*, 28/09/1968.

<sup>11</sup> *The Times*, 28/09/1968; *The Guardian*, 26/09/1968.

members of the cast decided it gave the wrong impression of the production and needed to be seen in the context of the whole play.<sup>12</sup>

Even in a late-night slot, it is perhaps less surprising that the song 'Where Do I Go?' was dropped than that the broadcasting of it was contemplated at all. 'The Eamonn Andrews Show', hosted by one of British television's then most-popular and 'family-friendly' personalities, was a chat show interspersed with musical and variety performances. Nonetheless, the intention to perform the song was, it appears, genuine:

Mr. Philip Jones, head of light entertainment at Thames Television, the production company, said that technically there were no problems about producing the scene ... 'We thought we could do this in the best of taste, but after hearing the views of the cast we decided to substitute another song'.<sup>13</sup>

That other song would be the show's up-tempo title number, with Paul Nicholas and Oliver Tobias leading the Tribe in celebrating 'the beauty, the splendour, the wonder of my Hair'.<sup>14</sup>

The majority of theatre critics interpreted the much-anticipated nude scene in the manner in which, according to one actress who would join the London cast in 1971, it was intended:

This scene was not for titillation, it was for the members of the cast to all stand together holding hands, coming out from under a pure silk sheet, which from the front of house looked as if we were stepping out from water. The character of Claude, the young recruit, was sitting in the middle like a Christ-like figure. We were doing the nude scene as a protest against the sending of innocent young men to Vietnam, and to highlight that we were all the same whatever race we were, as the show was ... a mixed race production.<sup>15</sup>

Nearly forty years later, one early audience member, the actor and broadcaster Nicholas Parsons, would describe the nude scene on the long-running BBC Radio series *Desert Island Discs*. In explaining his choice of 'Aquarius' as one of the songs to accompany him to the eponymous, fictional island, Parsons recounted,

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<sup>12</sup>*The Times*, 27/09/1968.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Hair* script, p.38.

<sup>15</sup> Marianne Price, letter to the author, 13/04/2006.



with considerable passion, that *Hair* summed up a time when ‘people, young, and middle-aged like me, were breaking down all kinds of traditional arcane attitudes’ and ‘new things were happening in the theatre’. He recalled that

at the end of the first half they all seemed to be under a huge blanket and they struggled to get their kit off. And then the blanket was whipped away and they all stood up absolutely stark naked and they went into another number. And, you know, it wasn’t done to be provocative, it was actually rather innocent. And that was the joy of this period – there was an innocence, there was a great love going on everywhere.<sup>16</sup>

This response would have delighted director Tom O’Horgan, who told *IT* in 1968 that

the uni-sexual notion is really what’s finally being stated for the first time in the theatre ...and sexual practises in general are not subject to the mores and taboos of yesterday. The whole notion today is what you do is your thing and that’s that. It need not infringe upon me as long as in some way it does not hurt me. *HAIR* is a very good example of that kind of relationship, we bar nothing on the stage as far as the inference of sexual behaviour is concerned. And yet it is possibly the most naïve child-like piece you’ll probably ever see. That famed nude scene, is possibly the most innocent, and is certainly one of the most tasteful things in the play.<sup>17</sup>

*Punch*’s Jeremy Kingston concurred in 1968, using poetic and quintessentially Edenic, ‘hippy’, imagery to describe a scene he interpreted as ‘intended neither to affront nor to turn us one and all into sex maniacs but expressing the gentle, earnest, pathetic attempt to recapture primal innocence. It is the desire to start the world again’.<sup>18</sup>

Paul Nicholas might have been grateful for Kingston’s explanation of the nude scene. Nicholas has admitted that, as Claude, he ‘was never quite sure what it was meant to represent, but then I was the only guy who didn’t have to take his clothes off because I was busy singing at the time.’ He recalls, however, that

it was quite liberating for the people doing it. I don’t think it upset people, really. I didn’t see any maiden aunts fainting in the aisles. But we did have the odd brown overcoat in the front row and we did have the odd person who’d come up on stage for the nude scene – but you couldn’t really get too upset about it. We were preaching freedom after all.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Parsons, interviewed on *Desert Island Discs*, BBC Radio 4, first broadcast 4 November 2007.

<sup>17</sup> *International Times*, No 41, 4-17/10/1968.

<sup>18</sup> *Punch*, 9/10/1968.

<sup>19</sup> *The Times*, 29/03/2010.

*The Sunday Telegraph's* Frank Marcus agreed that 'it would take a pervert or a Puritan to see something dirty.'<sup>20</sup> Wilfred De'ath also reported that lasciviousness was neither the intention nor the result, given that 'the total effect' of the nude scene was 'about as erotic as a brisk walk round the statues at the British Museum'.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, both Michael Billington and 'experimental' director Charles Marowitz – then establishing London's Open Space theatre, and at the height of his considerable creative powers and influence – found the reality of the nudity relatively timid and anti-climactic. Billington recalls that, while he

loved *Hair* for its songs, its jubilant hippiedom and its anti-Vietnam protest...in truth, the only disappointment was the much-touted nudity, which seemed to take place in semi-darkness. As Charles Marowitz noted at the time: 'If one is going to show butts, boobs and assorted genitalia in a show like *Hair*, it must be, like everything else in the show, in a blaze of abandon'.<sup>22</sup>

The (exclusively male) reviewers did tend to dwell, however, with barely-disguised salaciousness, on the physicality of the female cast members. Detailed, almost prurient, descriptions of the naked females are often accompanied by disavowals of the possible aesthetic appeal of the naked male form. Wilfred De'ath, for example, considered 'the girls' to be 'quite beautiful', just as Alan Brien in New York had 'found all the ... beautifully sculpted young girls ... immediately sympathetic – supple-waisted, burning-eyed, moist-lipped maenads. The men took longer to adjust to with their tousled heads, sweating torsos and grubby feet'; although Brien did 'adjust' to them well enough to register that they were 'noticeably ... well-endowed'.<sup>23</sup> Two London reviewers expressed great surprise that, in the principal female role of Sheila, Annabel Leventon's '[Oxford University Drama Society] background does not prevent her joining in the more orgiastic scenes with zeal and relish'.<sup>24</sup> Harold Hobson was similarly surprised that this graduate 'of what Mr Gladstone used to call "the ancient and God-fearing University of Oxford"' should disrobe. Notably, Leventon's rendition of Sheila's

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<sup>20</sup> *The Sunday Telegraph*, 29/09/1968.

<sup>21</sup> *The Illustrated London News*, 12/10/1968, p.43.

<sup>22</sup> *The Guardian*, 15/02/2007, citing Charles Marowitz, *Plays and Players*, November 1968, p.55.

<sup>23</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 28/04/1968.

<sup>24</sup> *The Illustrated London News*, 12/10/1968, p.43.

most important song demonstrated, for Hobson, her second most note-worthy talent: 'stunningly beautiful in the famous nude scene', she was also 'memorable in "Easy to be hard"'.<sup>25</sup> The overwhelming impression is, therefore, that, amongst the theatre-reviewing fraternity, support for newly-unleashed stage nudity did not equate to a revolution in sexual attitudes.

Annabel Leventon herself has explained that one famous and seemingly integral element of *Hair* resulted from an entirely spontaneous event on the first night in London. It became an established convention of the show – and an addition to the script – that 'after the finale of "Let the Sunshine In", the cast goes out into the theatre and encourages the audience to come up on the stage with them to dance and sing'.<sup>26</sup> However, 'it was not always so'. Leventon recalls vividly that at the London premiere 'the audience was so moved by the performance that after the finale they spontaneously rushed the stage to join the cast, completely uninvited. This was a natural phenomenon'.<sup>27</sup> Paul Nicholas has confirmed that 'after that it seemed to happen every night'.<sup>28</sup> Director Tom O'Horgan was delighted that 'nobody asked them to, they just did it. I thought that was amazing, so we put it into every production after that'.<sup>29</sup>

Marianne Price, who would shortly join the Shaftesbury cast, confirms the importance of what she calls the post-show 'Hair rave', when

the band would play on and sometimes the music and dancing with the audience would go on for nearly half an hour on a good night. Some people got so carried away that if you said you liked something that they were wearing i.e. a necklace or belt then they would take it off and give it to you. One cast member told someone that he liked his leather jacket and the guy took it off and gave it to him insisting that he kept it.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Evening Standard*, 28/09/1968.

<sup>26</sup> The final stage direction of the revised 1995 script states: 'Audience is encouraged to dance onstage with the Tribe'. *Hair* script, p.91.

<sup>27</sup> Annabelle Leventon, cited in Johnson, *Good Hair*, p.26.

<sup>28</sup> *The Times*, 29/03/2010.

<sup>29</sup> Cited in Wollman, *The Theater*, p.50. These recollections negate George Melly's statement of October 1969 that 'everything' about the London production of *Hair*, 'including the invasion of the audience, has been rehearsed with the precision of a military parade'. Melly, *Revolt*, p.226.

<sup>30</sup> Price, email, 16/06/2006.

She recalls that ‘many famous people of the time ... would all make their way onto the stage and dance with the cast’. Paul Nicholas has noted that David Niven, John Lennon and Judy Garland came to see the London production during his time with the show.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, one of the reasons why *The New York Times* considered the London first-night audience to be ‘cool’ to *Hair* (in the then-new sense of ‘hip’, ‘sophisticated’ or ‘fashionably aware’) was because of the number of ‘celebrities’ who ‘took the cue’ for participation in the finale. Amongst those who joined in were the Duke of Bedford, Terence Stamp, Zsa Zsa Gabor, and “Baby” Jane Holzer. The youthful Earl of Lichfield stood in the middle of the orchestra taking photographs. The dancing went on for about 15 minutes’. This list of those in attendance at the opening night – one minor aristocrat; Stamp, then a globally successful film actor and fashion icon of ‘Swinging London’ (and brother of The Who’s co-manager, Chris Stamp); Hollywood film star and socialite Gabor; and Holzer, one of New York Pop-artist Andy Warhol’s muses – provides a summary of the nexus of transatlantic show-business glamour and English aristocratic lineage which so defined the ‘Chelsea set’. Indeed, while on the first-night ‘there were some Indian feathers, fringes, and beads in the audience...a good deal of Chelsea high style – velvet and ruffles on the men, crepe slacks without underwear for the women,’ was also, apparently, on display.<sup>32</sup>

The theatre programmes during *Hair*’s five-year London run confirm that the target audience was, as throughout the West End, the middle-class and well-to-do; or those who aspired to such status. The advertising spaces are dominated by fashionable luxury items such as Guerlain perfume and the alcoholic spirits Dubonnet and Chartreuse; the latter, according to the advertisement by-line, being ‘the aristocrat of liquers’. Cigarette adverts were almost ubiquitous on the backs of West End programmes at the turn of the 1960s, but, again, luxury brands such as Dunhill or Benson and Hedges are predominant.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *The Times*, 29/03/2010.

<sup>32</sup> Anthony Lewis, ‘Londoners Cool to *Hair*’s Nudity: Four Letter Words Shock Few At Musical’s Debut’, *The New York Times*, 29/09/1968.

<sup>33</sup> *Hair* programmes, 1968, c.1969, 1971, The Museum of London.

The first *Hair* programme also advertised the ultra-modern ‘Philips Battery Portable Cassette Recorder EL 3302’, which offered ‘Snap-in sound for town and around!’ This enabled the music-lover to ‘record or play back – anywhere. Instantly. It’s all so easy with this neat little portable recorder’. With ‘simple controls’, and ‘complete with microphone and carrying case’, any purchaser could now ‘just snap in a Compact Cassette or Musicassette – and you’re away!’<sup>34</sup> Philips considered it ‘a sound buy’, listing the price – with deliberately up-market affectation – as ‘30 guineas’. This price, equivalent to £31. 10s. 0d, exceeded the average weekly income of even the highest-paid sector of the British labour force – non-manual male workers over the age of 21 – whose average weekly wage in 1968 was £29. 16s. 0d.<sup>35</sup> An accompanying ‘Great Musicassette offer!’ would ‘help you start building your collection’ with ‘three exciting E.P. [extended play] Musicassettes for only 34/6 [£1. 14s. 6d] when you buy any Philips Cassette Recorder’.

Another advertisement makes a bizarre attempt to link the product for sale with the content of the show. Given the hippy ‘street’ clothes worn onstage by the *Hair* cast, the image of a languorous, reclining woman wearing a long cocktail dress initially seems an incongruous manner in which to sell ‘The Aquarius soda siphon: the new siphon from Sparklets’.<sup>36</sup> This item could, nonetheless, serve as both a souvenir of the show and a practical tool; with which one might add a dash of soda, on the return home, to a post-show Dubonnet (perhaps savoured while smoking a ‘luxury length Dunhill International cigarette’).

This glamorously-attired and apparently prosperous woman was, however, a skilful marketing choice with which to appeal to the West End *Hair* audience. Marianne Price has noted that

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<sup>34</sup> Philips had launched the ‘Compact Cassette’ in 1963. Shrewd licensing to other manufacturers ensured that it became the dominant audio tape format by the end of the 1960s. See, for example, Michael Chanan, *Repeated Takes: A Short History of Recording and its Effects on Music* (London: Verso, 1995). The number of available ‘Musicassettes’ – LP records released in cassette form by record companies – expanded rapidly in the early 1970s.

<sup>35</sup> *Ministry of Labour Gazette British Labour Statistics: Historical abstract 1886-1968*, in David Butler and Gareth Butler, *British Political Facts 1900-1994* (7<sup>th</sup> edition), (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1994), p.359.

<sup>36</sup> *Hair* programme, 23/11/1968, Museum of London.

when I was in the London show, I clearly remember the way that many members of the audience used to dress. The men would wear dinner suits, and tuxedos and always ties. The women, (with immaculately styled and bouffant hair), would wear long evening dresses, some sequinned, and many would wear the long evening gloves going up their arms, and have shiny diamante jewellery on.<sup>37</sup>

While no description is offered of what they wore, *The Times* reported that Lord and Lady Longford – then pursuing a vigorous, high-profile public campaign against pornography – saw *Hair* in September 1972.<sup>38</sup> It was not reported whether or not the Longfords participated in the onstage ‘rave’ finale. The Monarch’s teenage daughter, however, did so twice: on 15 April 1969 and 20 February 1970.

The *Daily Mail* was fascinated to find Princess Anne ‘among the hippies’. It printed a photograph, occupying more than half a broadsheet page, which confirms Price’s recollections of the physical appearance of an average *Hair* audience. The majority of the men are aged between 20 and 40, yet not one of them has what could be considered, by the standards of the time, ‘long’ hair. Almost all wear suits and ties. The women are dressed in smart, even formal, evening wear. One very elegantly coiffed and dressed lady dominates the bottom left of the photograph. Perhaps aged around 60, she is wearing a short, fur evening-jacket with a handbag draped over her gloved hand. In their midst is the Queen’s 18-year-old daughter, ‘in trouser suit and polo-necked sweater’, stepping off the stage with the rest of the audience after the finale; during which ‘the Princess and her escort danced and chatted with the cast for six minutes’. The *Mail* noted that they had watched ‘the controversial American show – complete with nude scene...from a fourth row seat in the stalls’.<sup>39</sup> Within less than a year the *Mail* was again in attendance to report that ‘Princess Anne and three friends watched the West End musical *Hair* for a second time last night’.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Price, letter, 13/04/2006.

<sup>38</sup> *The Times*, 26/09/1972. Former Cabinet minister Lord Longford attracted considerable media attention after announcing in the House of Lords in 1971 that he would personally investigate the pornography industry.

<sup>39</sup> *Daily Mail*, 16/04/1969.

<sup>40</sup> *Daily Mail*, 21/04/1970.



Princess Anne steps off the stage of the Shaftesbury Theatre.  
*Daily Mail*, 16/04/1969.

Princess Anne was 'unable' to contribute any recollections of her teenage trips to the Shaftesbury to this thesis.<sup>41</sup> Others have, however, been more forthcoming about their experiences of *Hair*. As her testimony cited thus far demonstrates, English actress Marianne Price possesses both an abiding passion for *Hair* and exceptionally detailed recall.<sup>42</sup> She was, for almost two years, a member of the first British touring production of *Hair*, which opened in Manchester on 3 March 1970 before going on to English cities such as Liverpool, Nottingham, Birmingham and Bristol (although not to Scotland, which, from July 1970, had its own successful production at the Glasgow Metropole Theatre).<sup>43</sup> The touring and Scottish productions replicated the success of that in London: by October 1970, over one million tickets had been sold at the Shaftesbury, another 250,000 on tour, and over 100,000 in Glasgow.<sup>44</sup> In late 1971 Price joined the Shaftesbury production for a further two years, reprising her touring role (and that of Elaine Paige in 1968) as Tribe member and understudy to the principal female role of Sheila. Price subsequently played the role of Jeannie in the 1975 London revival. In 1970, 19 year-old Marianne

had been working semi-professionally as a cabaret singer in the pubs and working men's clubs of North London and the East End since the age of fifteen. My day job had been in the local library in Tottenham ... [and then] ... at the London School of Economics in the Teaching Library for a while.

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<sup>41</sup> In a letter of 27 April 2007 the author invited Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal to comment on her trips to *Hair* and the press coverage they attracted. Princess Anne was asked if she could recall how she had first become aware of *Hair*, and which elements of the show had appealed to her so much that she wanted to see it twice. Miss Amy Briggs, her Assistant Private Secretary, replied on 12 March 2007 that The Princess was, unfortunately, 'unable to answer these personal questions'.

<sup>42</sup> Performers, stage managers and others cited in this thesis who were involved in the earliest productions of the Rock Operas in Britain responded to the author's letters to *The Stage*, published on 06 April 2006, and *Equity* (the journal of British Actors' Equity), published in Summer 2006; or to an email of 13 December 2005 to the academic mailing-list of the UK Standing Council of University Drama Departments (SCUDD), accessible via <http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/archives/scudd.html>. These appeals requested recollections and opinions large or small, positive or negative, and subjective or objective. Contributions were particularly sought from those who did not play principal roles and have not previously recounted their experiences.

<sup>43</sup> *Daily Mail*, 21/02/1970; *The Times*, 01/11/1970. The Metropole, in the St. George's Cross area of Glasgow, was owned by the well-known Scottish actor, comedian and impresario Jimmy Logan. Logan persuaded London producer James Verner to allow him to stage *Hair*, which ran for 10 months and played to a total audience of 200,000. The young Assistant Stage Manager of the London production, Cameron Mackintosh, was promoted to Company Manager at the Metropole. He subsequently told *The Times* that the Glasgow run was 'the most wonderful experience', to the extent that, 'on his last night with the show, swept up in the exuberance of the moment, Mackintosh allowed himself to be persuaded by the cast to join them at the end of Act One for the show's most notorious scene. So it was, Mackintosh says, that he made his first – and last – nude appearance on the professional stage'. *The Herald*, 12/09/2008; *The Times*, 29/03/2010.

<sup>44</sup> *The Times*, 01/11/1970.



I went and auditioned for *Hair* and when I got the job I never returned to the job at the LSE.<sup>45</sup>

She adopted an imaginative strategy to win the place in the Tribe which would dominate her life for five years, 'and it is on record that I was the only person ever to do this'.<sup>46</sup> Marianne auditioned 'firstly as myself singing a folk song, (I looked rather demure with long straightened blonde hair and a long hippy-type smock dress)'. Convinced, however, that she could do better and 'determined to get into the show' which 'was the "in" thing of its day', Price re-auditioned 'a couple of days later', wearing

a pink afro wig and trendy clothes and pretended to be an American actress (saying my name was Gayle McCourt), who had just flown in from the States and belted out *Big Spender*. I was amazed when they wanted both of us, and so was the [assistant] director on the first day of rehearsals when he called out my name and that of Gayle McCourt.

The fact that 'when I owned up everyone had a laugh' – including choreographer and assistant director David Toguri, charged with re-staging O'Horgan's production for the tour – confirms the further statements of Price and other participants in the Rock Operas who continued to work in commercial theatre into the 1980s and beyond.<sup>47</sup> Several of them note that this earlier era was one which, in marked contrast to the more 'professionalized' and 'business-like' ethos from the late 1970s onwards, tolerated and even celebrated spontaneous, humorous working methods and, at times, a somewhat dissolute back-stage atmosphere.

Indeed, when asked to describe the *Hair* costumes, the Shaftesbury Theatre's then Front-of-House manager recalls, with laughter, that they seemed to consist, primarily, of 'a lot of crushed velvet'.<sup>48</sup> Price, however, describes in extraordinary detail the extent to which the costumes did not merely resemble but often in fact *were* the 'hippy clothes and fashions of the era', because 'many of us wore our own clothes in the show'. She states that

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<sup>45</sup> Price, email, 16/06/2006.

<sup>46</sup> Price, letter, 13/04/2006.

<sup>47</sup> Price, email, 16/06/2006.

<sup>48</sup> Philip Wood, email to the author, 10/07/2006.

Most of us didn't wear anything on our feet. Cast members would swap tops and tee shirts sometimes before going on stage. The clothes were nearly always brightly coloured ... Jeans used to get ripped and torn very often because of all the 'floor work' done in the show – it was quite a physical show and our jeans had loads and loads of different coloured patches on our knees and thighs and rears.

Notably, the female costumes (unlike the clothes of the average audience-member) emphasized the home-made, improvised and non-consumerist. Some women in the cast wore

ponchos usually made from pretty tablecloths that had had a hole cut into the middle. Fringing on ponchos and ... on suede jackets and jerkins was especially popular. We also wore lots of different coloured long scarves which we would tie either round our necks, our heads ... round the top of our thighs (usually one leg), or use as a belt round our jeans or trousers ... Us girls and some of the guys wore lots of beads round our necks which were from India ... There were also kaftans worn by some of the girls and ... Claude wore a white kaftan rather like Jesus.

While flared trousers were almost ubiquitous amongst both the women and men, improvisation by the wardrobe department or cast was, again, the norm: 'Brightly coloured corded trousers ... and jeans were also usually flared by ... opening them up along the seams at the bottom and then sewing a different piece of coloured material into them. Some cast members wore very flared trousers.'<sup>49</sup> More ostentatious costumes seem, however, to have been the preserve of the males in the cast. As if to illustrate the message of the Act One song 'My Conviction', 'medallions and lots of fake gold jewellery' were 'worn by mainly the West Indian guys in the show. They would wear shirts or tops opened quite a way down and you would see all this jewellery'.<sup>50</sup>

Price recalls that 'the set was an open raked stage and had no curtains'. She notes, further, the extent to which the physical design of the production both reflected and facilitated the fluidity of the text and the nightly spontaneity of the

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<sup>49</sup> Price, email, 16/06/2006.

<sup>50</sup> '...longer hair and other flamboyant affectations of appearance are nothing more than the male's emergence from his drab camouflage into the gaudy plumage which is the birthright of his sex'. *Hair* script, pp.40-41.

performances. While 'parts' of the script 'had to be adhered to' and the 'core' staging 'had to be maintained',

around this when certain scenes were going on and the Tribe ... were not involved then they could sit on the stage, usually at the back or sides or on the steel structure and talk or read or move around the groups that would form. This would change from performance to performance.

The upstage area was dominated by 'a high steel structure that had platforms on it and signs, notices and lights', and 'on the right hand side of the stage was the bandwagon where the band were and the Musical Director'. Using all of these areas when not required in any particular scene, Marianne, 'like some of the girls', 'would knit and made various scarves. One girl did needlework at the side of the stage when she was not in a scene'. In quintessential O'Horgan-LaMama style, 'all this was in full view of the audience who could see comings and goings at all times'. For Price, the creative freedom within each nightly performance 'was not like any of the other West End shows that I was in afterwards as these were of a very much more disciplined style of musical that had to be adhered to pretty strictly'.<sup>51</sup>

The on-stage freedom of expression was reflected, in Price's experience, in the off-stage culture of the London *Hair* company. Mary Davis has made controversial and unsubstantiated claims that the Broadway company doctor employed by Michael Butler administered 'Vitamin B-12 shots' which 'were not mandatory' but 'would give us "lots of energy"'. Davis states that 'at least half the cast took the shots the first time, many for the same reason that I didn't take them: the suspicion, or knowledge, that there might be something more to the injection than Vitamin B-12'. While acknowledging that 'right from the beginning, some of the cast had always had their "ups" and "downs" (amphetamines and barbiturates), not to mention pot, to keep them going ... some ... said they reacted to the shots much in the same way as they did to "speed"'.<sup>52</sup> Jonathon Johnson ignores Davis' claims of management-sponsored drug use. Prior to joining the Broadway cast in 1971 he 'had heard rumours of heavy drug use'. While acknowledging that this may have been the case during the earlier years of the

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<sup>51</sup> Price, email, 16/06/2006.

<sup>52</sup> Davis, *Letting Down*, pp.72-73.

Biltmore run, he 'never saw any of this. For the most part all I ever saw was a joint here and there and maybe a little coke'.<sup>53</sup>

Asked if the backstage culture in London reflected the characterization of this era as one in which marijuana and 'free love' were prominent, Marianne Price has replied, bluntly: 'yes it was a case of this with *Hair*'. She explains, however, that 'a lot of us didn't take any drugs. Those who did just did the odd bit of dope or "pot" as it was known. It was used by some people on a regular basis in the dressing rooms. Sometimes there was the occasion when someone had taken a bit too much dope'. She recalls, however, only one user of hard drugs during her five years in the show.

Twenty-two year-old Philip Wood, Front-of-House Manager at the Shaftesbury between January 1971 and June 1972, was 'unaware of anything stronger than a joint being taken – which I refrained from'. While he considered the company camaraderie 'excellent', with 'a lot of socializing' amongst cast, crew and theatre staff, he has also stressed that 'there was much more discipline than people realised as well as sheer hard work'. Such 'strong discipline' was maintained not least because the 'SM [stage management] team would not brook any over-indulgence before a performance. I do recall, however, a Christmas Eve when the water barrels were filled with white wine ... The show went on!'<sup>54</sup>

Price's account suggests, however, that Wood may not have been aware of behaviour which exceeded the mere 'high-jinks' which almost inevitably develop, both on- and off-stage, during any long-running commercial theatre show which features a large cast and company. She states that there was 'a lot of sex, (affairs really and some one night stands)', but qualifies this recollection with the observation that 'in the main cast members paired off and stayed with that partner for a long time and also quite a few married and some had children'. Asked whether there were audience members whom the cast might have considered to be 'groupies', Marianne is careful to sub-divide the

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<sup>53</sup> Johnson, *Good Hair*, p.146.

<sup>54</sup> Wood, email, 10/07/2006.

many different types of groupies on *Hair*. Firstly there were the fans who ... just loved the show and everything about it and were happy to see it and chat to us afterwards and then go home. We also had a old man who was in his early sixties but looked much older, and working on the Underground ... He would buy a single ticket for a performance and always have the same seat on the front row and we all got to know him ... When he had seen the show for the 100 time we chipped in and bought him a seat for his next visit. He was made up ... Quite a few of us females had male groupies who would write to us and send us flowers. But that was all we never met up with them.<sup>55</sup>

While such behaviour amongst more fanatical audience members has become a notable feature of many long-running West End productions in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century, Price recalls that ‘there were others that were the “real McCoy” groupies, and would sleep with some of the guys and naturally be used by them’. As an actress who continued to work in the West End – notably in Rice and Lloyd Webber’s *Evita* in the early 1980s – her summary of the backstage culture is both frank and informed: ‘in other shows that I have been in, I have not noticed any drug taking, nor the amount of sex with cast members going on as was in *Hair*’.

Price is, however, adamant that the sense of personal liberation which she experienced through *Hair* was indivisible from the political, social and cultural messages of the piece. Marianne ‘loved the feeling of freedom of expression and that we as a cast were shocking audiences with facts about the atrocities of the Vietnam war and that we were the first mixed race cast smashing down barriers about colour and mixed relationships.’<sup>56</sup> Indeed, *The Times* noted in 1970 that the racially-integrated casting demanded by *Hair* resulted in the management ‘having difficulty filling gaps in the cast because the Race Relations Board will not permit advertisements inviting young coloured people to attend auditions. The board has ruled that they cannot specify colour or race’.<sup>57</sup> In terms of race alone,

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<sup>55</sup> Price, email, 16/06/2006. The term ‘groupie’ was ‘defined sniffily by *The Times* as a girl who “deliberately provokes sexual relations with pop stars”’. This explanation is offered in the Preface to the 1997 edition of the novel by Jenny Fabian and Johnny Byrne, *Groupie* (London: New English Library, 1969), p.iii. A fictionalized memoir, *Groupie* recounts, with great attention to period detail and considerable wit, the sexual adventures of 19 year old Londoner Katie and various members of barely-disguised ‘underground’ pop-rock groups.

<sup>56</sup> Price, email, 16/06/2006.

<sup>57</sup> *The Times*, 18/07/1970.

*Hair* was such a revolutionary development within British theatre that the initially limited availability of black British performers meant that some American actors had to be brought over to London. This, indirectly, resulted in an incident which attracted a great deal of attention from the press. This coverage gives an insight into the often ambivalent attitudes of British society and its media towards ethnic minorities and their representation on stage and television in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>58</sup>

*The Times* reported that, on 24 September 1969, 'four coloured members of the cast of the musical *Hair* failed yesterday in their attempt to enter the *Black and White Minstrel Show*. The four, who sought auditions in London partly as a gesture against the minstrels painting their faces black and partly to get a job, were told there was nothing available'.<sup>59</sup> *The Daily Telegraph's* Sean Day-Lewis barely disguised his derision in reporting that 'the invasion forces' of 'the great "Hair" protest ... had been sadly depleted' from the '40 members of the hippy musical cast' who, it had been announced, 'would demand to be included in auditions' for the stage production of *The Black and White Minstrel Show* at the Victoria Palace Theatre. Instead,

There were Gloria Stewart, a 24-year-old coloured actress from New York, three of her colleagues from the 'Hair' company, her younger sister, Deborah, over in London to 'study', and four supporters. Nothing daunted, Gloria clutched her ukulele and announced: 'We think it is making a mockery of coloured people, these white actors dancing around the stage with black all over their faces and big white lips.' She and her followers then approached the unwelcoming man at the desk, who told them that the auditions were over. 'I don't believe it,' she shouted, leading her small party, a much larger gathering of photographers and two policemen on a march through the labyrinthine building. The march ended in a tiny room with a piano. Voices were raised .... Two polite police constables kept insisting: 'Everybody out, come on everybody out.' Everybody stood his, or her, ground.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> See, for example: Angela Barry, 'Black Mythologies: The Representation of Black People on British Television', John Twitchin (editor), *The Black and White Media Book: Handbook for the Study of Racism and Television* (Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books, 1988), pp.83-102; Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black In The Union Jack': The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

<sup>59</sup> *The Times*, 25/09/1969.

<sup>60</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 25/09/1969.

According to *The Times*, Gloria Stewart did then insist on auditioning – by singing ‘Bye, Bye, Blackbird’ – only to be told ‘that no vacancy existed for a girl singer, although an advertisement to that effect is carried in the theatrical press’.<sup>61</sup> ‘Mr Keith Legget, the head Minstrel, said he had no objections to coloured people arriving for auditions. Ten had done so before during the nine years that the shows had been going and had been rejected only because they were not up to the right standard’.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Legget was reported as claiming that ‘his employers would have been delighted to take any of them on had they been suitable, as it would have saved a fortune in make-up’.<sup>63</sup> He told *The Daily Telegraph* that

People see us as a harmony show, there is nothing offensive in it and we have been well received all over the world, including coloured countries,’ he added. In the street below the crowd grew larger and a passer-by said angrily that he had walked out of ‘Hair’ because it was so ‘filthy’. He approved of the Black and White Minstrels because they were a ‘clean show’.<sup>64</sup>

*The Times* concluded that ‘Miss Stewart, who organized the protest, said blacking of faces was offensive to the coloured race. The blacking of minstrel faces conditioned people, particularly children, to thinking of coloured people as coons’.<sup>65</sup> Oz magazine reported Stewart’s protest, and her further statement that the ‘traditional’ minstrel show

was conceived in an era of the Ku Klux Klan and economic slavery of our people. It was born when lynching, rape, castration and miscegenation were commonplace in the so-called United States of America. Let us not forget that the ‘Americans’ in this case were newly arrived English immigrants who started the whole damned thing. Is such a tradition worth preserving in the name of good entertainment fit for Grandmothers and

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<sup>61</sup> *The Times*, 25/09/1969.

<sup>62</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 25/09/1969.

<sup>63</sup> *The Times*, 25/09/1969.

<sup>64</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 25/09/1969. The Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC) encountered similar reactions from the *Minstrels*’ audience, but, perhaps surprisingly, some solidarity from the Minstrels themselves. Tariq Ali, the VSC’s most prominent public spokesman, has noted that, three days prior to the Grosvenor Square anti-Vietnam War protest of 17 March 1968, VSC activists ‘interrupted twenty theatre performances in London’ by climbing ‘on to the stage, usually, though not always, at the end of a scene’ to tell ‘audiences about our movement. There was a great deal of sympathy from both those on stage and in the audience and we left after distributing leaflets. The one place where the audience had been extremely hostile was the *Black and White Minstrel Show*, but here the situation was saved by the “minstrels” who turned out to be sympathetic and insisted the audience give us a hearing’. Tariq Ali, *Street Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties* (London: Collins, 1987), p.178.

<sup>65</sup> *The Times*, 25/09/1969.

elderly ladies in such a great country where so many Black people are becoming restless, angry and tired of the laughing game?'<sup>66</sup>

Oz informed its readers that Gloria Stewart was fired from *Hair* shortly after making these statements to the press. It also reprinted some of the viciously racist hate-mail which she had received as a result of her protest.<sup>67</sup> Oz claimed, in a later article by another former London cast member (the neutrality of which will be considered in Chapter Six), that producer James 'Verner expressed his disapproval of her statement, and a fortnight later, Gloria was out on her ear. Verner had apparently previously been offered a top nob job with – guess who – yes the B.A.W.M.S [*Black and White Minstrel Show*], so this could be the reason for his uptight reaction I suppose'.<sup>68</sup>

Stewart and her fellow cast members were, however, despite the *Telegraph's* sneering tone, making a highly prescient statement about the stereotypical and, from a twenty-first century perspective, blatantly racist content of *The Black and White Minstrel Show* in both its stage and televisual forms. The extraordinary cultural impact of this show throughout Britain in the 1960s and 1970s is worthy of note. Running from 1958 to 1978 on BBC One on Sunday evenings it was, consistently, one of the most popular programmes on British television. A forty-five minute variety show which regularly attracted audiences in excess of 16 million, it featured 'The George Mitchell Singers' as the 'Mitchell Minstrels'. These white males in 'blackface' make-up performed lavishly-costumed and skilfully-choreographed musical sequences evocative of the Antebellum American South. The white, female 'Television Toppers' dance troupe were the demure white women who partnered these smiling, passive, blacked-up white men. Numerous successful record albums of songs from the show were released. The programme was awarded the Rose d'Or *grand prix* at the first ever international television festival at Montreux, Switzerland in 1961. Indeed, such was the ratings

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<sup>66</sup> Oz number 25, December 1969. In the USA, although 'white men in blackface had portrayed Negro characters since well before the American Revolution', Minstrelsy first truly 'swept the nation in the mid-1840's'. English actor Charles Matthews' act 'A Trip to America' marked 'the first certain example of a white man borrowing Negro material for a blackfaced act.'. Robert C. Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 26-27, 31.

<sup>67</sup> Oz number 25, December 1969.

<sup>68</sup> Kate Garrett, cited in 'Love Rock Tribal Schlock', Oz number 30, October 1970.



success and visual impact of the show that in 1967 it became, ironically, one of the first British television programmes to be produced and broadcast in colour.

From the late 1960s, however, objections were, increasingly, voiced against *The Black and White Minstrel Show's* stereotypical depiction of blacks. A petition organized by the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination calling for the show's cancellation was delivered to the BBC on 18 May 1967. Nonetheless, only a fall in ratings for all forms of 'variety' programming towards the end of the 1970s – by which time black performers remained a rarity on British television – brought the television show to an end on 1 July 1978. The stage production, however, continued to tour the UK until 1987. Indeed, Robert Luff's original London production at the Victoria Palace had, during its run of 6,477 performance between 1960 and 1972, entered *The Guinness Book Of Records* as the stage show seen by the largest number of people.<sup>69</sup> Thus, while Marianne Price remains intensely proud of the challenge which *Hair* posed to the prevailing depictions of race represented by *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, it is perfectly possible – indeed, statistically likely – that some or even many London theatre-goers, such as Gloria Stewart's heckler quoted by *The Daily Telegraph*, saw both. The long, simultaneous London runs of both productions reveal a co-existing appetite for highly polarized portrayals of blacks on stage.

For Marianne Price, the *Hair* cast was, regardless of race, 'like a family ... there was a lot of love for each other'. Such familial closeness was required on tour, when, even more so than in London,

things were very different for us, as because of the way we dressed and because we were a mixed race cast, many people in the provinces at that time were very hostile ... Our fashionable hippy clothes which were all the rage in London, were not at that time so evident in places like the North of England, this was 1970-1972. Also many of us had great difficulty finding accommodation. I myself spent four weeks sleeping mainly alone in my dressing room at the Liverpool Empire, because of this. It was so cold that winter that I put on the gorilla suit that the character Claude would wear in the show, just to keep warm. Another time I commuted on the train alone

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<sup>69</sup> 'Screenonline', *British Film Institute*, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk> (accessed 04/04/2007); *The Museum of Broadcast Communications, Chicago* <http://www.museum.tv/museumsection.php> (accessed 04/04/2007).

back to Manchester and then out to Sale where I had good digs with a teacher. I had stayed with her the first time round in Manchester, and she had been happy to take in my friends, Floella Benjamin and Joan Armatrading, as well as myself.<sup>70</sup>

There is no little irony in the fact that Benjamin and Armatrading, two black women who struggled to find digs on tour in the provinces in the early 1970s, would become, before the end of the decade, household names throughout Britain as two of its most prominent black entertainers. Floella Benjamin, born in Trinidad and raised in Kent, auditioned for *Hair* at the age of 19. Having promised her parents that ‘she “wouldn’t ever do anything bad”’, she was a teetotal non-smoker who did not disrobe for the nude scene. Indeed, Benjamin married one of the stage management team.<sup>71</sup> She moved on from the *Hair* tour to *Jesus Christ Superstar* at the Palace Theatre before becoming familiar to a generation of British pre-school age children – and their parents – as a regular presenter from 1976 on the BBC’s long-running television programme *Play School* and its spin-off *Play Away*. *Play School* (in which Benjamin also became the first female presenter to appear visibly pregnant on British television) had, since its inception in 1964, broken new ground through its use of an increasingly ethnically-diverse ‘repertory company’ of regular presenters.<sup>72</sup> After the demise of *Play School* in 1988, Benjamin became a successful producer of children’s television, a respected authority on pre-school education and, in 2010, a Peer of the Realm: ennobled as Baroness Benjamin, of Beckenham in the County of Kent, she took the Liberal Democrat whip.<sup>73</sup> Joan Armatrading, born in St. Kitts and raised in Birmingham, became a successful singer-songwriter and recording artist from the mid-1970s onwards. Notwithstanding the continuing success of *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, both of these women were, therefore, in the vanguard of an incremental but profound shift in popular representations of British Commonwealth immigrants and ethnic minorities during the 1970s. Both gained their first professional experience as performers in Britain in *Hair*.

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<sup>70</sup> Price, letter, 13/04/2006.

<sup>71</sup> *The Guardian*, 15/09/2008.

<sup>72</sup> <http://www.floellabenjamin.com/aboutme/nostalgia.html> (accessed 22/03/2007); <http://www.bbc.co.uk/cult/classic/playschool/playschool02.pdf> (accessed 22/03/2007).

<sup>73</sup> *Daily Mail*, 30/06/2010.

The London and other British productions made a substantial contribution to the world-wide success of *Hair*. Global producer Michael Butler is the ultimate source of financial statistics on the success of the show. Even if viewed with a healthily sceptical eye to allow for the marketing benefits of ‘hype’, there is no doubt that these attendance and profit figures were historically unprecedented. On an initial total investment in the Broadway production of \$250,000, ‘*Hair* returned 40 times to its original investors ... In a 2001 article about *Hair* Michael Butler said, “The show grossed \$80 million globally” – which Johnson calculates as a 2004 value of \$800 million – “before the last love bead was put away”.<sup>74</sup> An extraordinary number of cast recordings were made in rapid succession around the world: by 1970 alone the Butler organization reported that ‘726 recordings have been made from the score of *Hair*, making it the most recorded show in Broadway history’.<sup>75</sup> By 1971, the management claimed that over 5 million of these albums had been sold worldwide and over 10 million people had seen the show.<sup>76</sup> ‘By 1972, unlike any other show in history, *Hair* had 35 companies of the show running worldwide’.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, by April 1972, according to Mary Davis, ‘more than twenty-six million theatre-goers in twenty-two countries throughout the world’ had attended a performance.<sup>78</sup> In June 1972, the last playbill of the Broadway production noted that Michael Butler ‘has seen his now-classic musical in 25 countries in 14 languages.’<sup>79</sup>

The London production, which, at 1,997 performances compared to 1,750 on Broadway, ran longer than any other in the world, was a key contributor to *Hair*’s global success.<sup>80</sup> It closed prematurely on 20 July 1973 due to the sudden

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<sup>74</sup> Johnson, *Good Hair*, p.xiii; <http://www.hairthemusical.com/history.html>.

<sup>75</sup> ‘July 1970 *Hair* Press Kit’, cited in Johnson, *Good Hair*, p.95.

<sup>76</sup> ‘July 1971 *Hair* Press Kit’, cited in *Ibid.*, p.209. The London cast recording of *Hair* was released in 1968 as a single Polydor LP, number 583043. That this album was promptly re-issued by Polydor in collaboration with the distinctly conservative, family-orientated publication *Reader’s Digest* (catalogue number RDS 9039) further suggests that *Hair* had indeed succeeded in ‘turning on’ a mainstream UK audience. The time restriction of a single LP meant, however, that neither imprint of this disc contained the entire score of *Hair*. The material which had been omitted from the 1968 album was recorded and released in 1970 as another single Polydor LP, number 2371066, entitled *Fresh Hair*. Both albums were combined and re-released in 1993 as the single Polydor Compact Disc (CD) *Hair*, number 519 973-2.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xiii.

<sup>78</sup> Davis, *Letting Down*, p.271.

<sup>79</sup> ‘Last Broadway *Hair* Playbill’, cited in Johnson, *Good Hair*, p.174.

<sup>80</sup> Richards (ed.), *Great Rock Musicals*, pp.381-2.

collapse of part of the roof of the (then empty) Shaftesbury Theatre.<sup>81</sup> The *Evening Standard* reported that the ‘abrupt’ closure

two months before the show was due to come off on September 17 means a substantial loss in box office receipts. The show has been playing to near-capacity all summer and there were bookings up to September 1. The total takings in the 1500-seat theatre were at least £10,000 a week.<sup>82</sup>

Indeed, having been so successful as to spawn the national tour, the Glasgow Metropole production, and a further production at seaside resorts dubbed ‘Holiday Hair’ – resulting in, ‘at one time...four productions running at the same time in the UK’ – *Hair* was swiftly revived in London for a short run at the Queen’s Theatre in 1974 and a further summer-season run at Her Majesty’s Theatre in 1975.<sup>83</sup> *Hair* remains, as of 2011, by far the longest-running show at the Shaftesbury Theatre since it opened in 1911 (first as the New Prince’s Theatre, and later the Prince’s Theatre, before being bought by EMI in 1962 and rechristened ‘The Shaftesbury Theatre’).<sup>84</sup>

Marianne Price’s conclusions on *Hair* are perceptive. She cherishes her personal memories of ‘a wonderful time, and although I have been in many West End shows since, for me there has never been anything like *Hair*’.<sup>85</sup> Paul Nicholas has expressed similar sentiments about ‘a charmed time’. While he admits that he was ‘spoilt having this as my first show’, that ‘there’s been nothing since that can top the joy of it’ is an even more revealing statement from an actor, singer and theatrical producer who has worked continuously since 1968, and with considerable success, in the film, television and recording industries as well as the theatre.

The objective judgements of Nicholas and Price are, however, also valid – and on political and economic as well as creative grounds. For Nicholas, *Hair* ‘felt like a

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<sup>81</sup> This event raised fears that the building was structurally unsound. When combined with proposed road redevelopment, demolition of the theatre was, for several years, a distinct possibility. The Shaftesbury was, however, reprieved, repaired and refurbished and is still an important venue in London’s theatrical West End.

<sup>82</sup> *Evening Standard*, 23/07/1973.

<sup>83</sup> Price, letter, 13/04/2006; Horn, *The Age*, p.110; Price, email, 16/06/2006.

<sup>84</sup> The Shaftesbury Theatre, letter to the author, 5/12/2006.

<sup>85</sup> Price, email, 16/06/2006.

watershed' because 'it felt very up to date. And it was challenging. We were challenging the Vietnam War, challenging people's position on marijuana. We broke lots of taboos'. It was because of all of these elements, and not merely because it was his first stage show, that *Hair* was, for Nicholas, 'a life-changing experience'.<sup>86</sup> Price synthesizes his reasons into one, bold conclusion: for her, 'it was not just a show, it was a cultural phenomenon'.<sup>87</sup> Marianne would be echoed, uncannily, by Michael Billington who, forty-two years after it first opened in London, called *Hair* 'more than just a musical: it is a social and cultural phenomenon'.<sup>88</sup>

*Hair* brought the processes of ensemble script development, rehearsal and staging, in combination with the haphazard initial economics of production, from the 'experimental' sphere into the mainstream theatre of New York, London, and the American and British provinces. It was the first show ever to transfer from Off-to On-Broadway, let alone thereafter to London's West End and many major stages of the world. The result would be a new and revolutionary creative and economic model for the commercial theatre; such worldwide, simultaneous 'franchising' of almost identical productions of musical theatre works becoming, by the end of the twentieth century, an established and highly lucrative sector of the globalized cultural industries.

Above all, however, *Hair* was – and remains – a highly significant cultural and historical text. It opened a window onto aspects of "The Sixties" which allowed its predominantly 'mainstream' audience to glimpse, and to be both touched and challenged by, many of the central political concerns – the Vietnam War, sexuality, spirituality, drugs, generational conflict and race – of the broadly-defined counter-cultural agenda of the period. Broadway cast member Jonathon Johnson is, therefore, correct in his conclusions that 'the authors of *Hair* lovingly created a palatable mix of music, dance and a message of love and peace' which was 'able to encapsulate all these elements of the sixties into a form that [was] easily

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<sup>86</sup> *The Times*, 29/03/2010.

<sup>87</sup> Price, email, 16/06/2006.

<sup>88</sup> *The Guardian*, 14/04/2010.

communicated and warmly accepted' by 'millions of people around the globe, many of whom may not have been reached through any other medium'.<sup>89</sup> The next chapter considers the apparently illogical and uniformly negative response of many prominent Counter-Culturalists towards *Hair's* success in disseminating – and even proselytizing on behalf of – the counter-cultural agenda.

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<sup>89</sup> Johnson, *Good Hair*, pp.x, xii.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Counter-cultural reactions to *Hair* in London, and *Hair* and its creators since the 1970s

#### 6.1 'Shallow simulacrum': Counter-cultural reactions to *Hair* in London

In his fulsome praise of *Hair* in advance of its opening in London, Alan Brien singled out 'the way it can mock its own pretensions' and 'satirise its own philosophy' as the show's 'most likeable attribute'.<sup>1</sup> Wilfred De'ath agreed that

*Hair* is the more likeable for sending itself up: some of the more laughable – and conventional – aspects of the protest movement (the banners, the sit-ins, the lie-downs) are gently but effectively satirized, and there are neat take-offs of the film, television, and advertising worlds, the nightmare Admass society as created by Madison Avenue. But the central problem, that of Vietnam (to go or not to go?) is kept fully in our vision throughout this intensely exciting show, which ends with a rousing statement of the horror of death in such a war and a deeply moving affirmation and celebration of the life-giving force.<sup>2</sup>

Many prominent English Counter-Culturalists disagreed profoundly with Brien and De'ath, but showed little willingness to 'mock their own pretensions'. Instead, they chose to target *Hair* as a particularly repugnant symbol of what they considered to be the exploitative, derivative commercial world of mass consumerism and advertising (created primarily in New York's Madison Avenue) which De'ath crystallized as 'the nightmare Admass society'.

For Jonathon Green, *Hair* was worthy of disparagement for several reasons. Firstly, it was behind the times: 'as is the way of commerce', it arrived 'too late even for the first flush of hippie exploitation'.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, 'it was hardly what the long campaign to push through the [Theatres] Act had struggled to promote'.<sup>4</sup> Green neglects, however, to offer an alternative prototype for the post-1968 theatre of which he would have approved. *Hair* was also guilty of instigating the theatrical trend for Rock Operas. For Green, all those subsequently produced on London's stages, and particularly *Jesus Christ Superstar*, were to be dismissed as

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<sup>1</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 28/04/1968.

<sup>2</sup> *The Illustrated London News*, 12/10/1968, p.43.

<sup>3</sup> Green, *All Dressed Up*, p.222.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.223.

merely 'hippified'.<sup>5</sup> The content of *Hair* was equally as offensive as its commercial origins. As a result,

while the coach parties, who would roll in for the next few years, loved it, the real hippies were repelled by its banalities. As an exemplar of mass-marketed trivialisation, of course, it was unrivalled. Politics were eliminated, as was any genuine hippy activity, especially smoking dope... [*Hair*] ... reduced psychedelia (let alone the political protest that was supposedly part of the show) to middle-of-the-road pap. Keen to show its cutting-edge liberalism it offered a few obscenities, and a good deal of nudity, and a song called 'Sodomy' got the press very excited.

Green could more accurately have claimed that the production contained (as described in earlier chapters) a good deal of obscenities but only one fleeting sequence of nudity. For him and 'the real hippies', however, *Hair* was, *in toto*, 'shallow simulacrum'. Damningly, it was even 'safe enough for a teenage Princess to be wheeled in to show her supposed identification with "ordinary" young people'.<sup>6</sup>

Bernard Levin also cited Princess Anne's visits as a symbol of *Hair*'s 'failure'. Levin found common cause with the Counter-Culturalists in criticizing the post-1968 West End for failing 'to persuade ... new audiences into the theatre'. *Hair* was the 'most spectacular failure', despite being 'the most successful (in commercial terms)'. For Levin, it

suffered the ultimate but inevitable indignity of being clasped to the very bosom that was meant to reject it, namely that of the traditional middle-class audiences; the producers, promoters, and participants of *Hair* had finally to recognize defeat when Princess Anne not only went, but joined in the on-stage dancing.<sup>7</sup>

Peter Doggett has, more recently, added his voice to the chorus of critics of 'the so-called "tribal rock musical"' which, 'with its orchestrated frenzy and psychedelic pastiches', he dismisses as 'a theatrical piece that cannibalised the rhetoric of hippies and radical youth in the interests of mildly scandalising' commercial theatre audiences. Doggett praises, however, Megan Terry's *Viet Rock*, which he describes as 'the first ever rock musical' and a valid 'attempt to cross-pollinate

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.223. Emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.223.

<sup>7</sup> Levin, *The Pendulum Years*, pp.352-353.



artistic genres in the name of protest'. *Viet Rock*, for Doggett, 'certainly encouraged the free expression of ideas and actions, combined with the kind of scything satire previously heard from the Fugs and shortly to enter the commercial mainstream via Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention"<sup>8</sup>. Doggett seems completely unaware of the close link between the content of *Viet Rock* and that of *Hair* – which he so despises – and the debt owed to Terry and acknowledged by Ragni and Rado.

Mick Farren, like Doggett and Jonathon Green, found the 'hippiefied' commercialization of *Hair* to be 'extremely irksome'. 'It shouldn't come as a surprise', Farren has noted phlegmatically, 'that, while cops chased and imprisoned the counterculture, the corporate entertainment industry was more than happy to turn a profit from it'. Farren was, however, a tenant of a top-floor flat at 212 Shaftesbury Avenue. Therefore, that

*Hair* should be playing in the theatre under our apartment brought the vexation just a little too close to home. From the building-sized billboard with the huge silhouette of a generic freak with a haircut just like mine, to the crowds of gawpers who thronged the pavements at showtime and seemed to assume that we were some kind of pre-show attraction hired by the producers, the proximity of *Hair* proved a strain on the nerves.<sup>9</sup>

Steve Sparks was one of those who lived with Farren above the Shaftesbury Theatre. He was, at least initially, flattered and amused when, on emerging from his flat, he would encounter 'all the punters who came to *Hair* ... and there you were in your long barnet and your hippie nonsense and they thought they'd bought you as well.'<sup>10</sup>

Tensions escalated, however, when Farren, Sparks and their flatmates

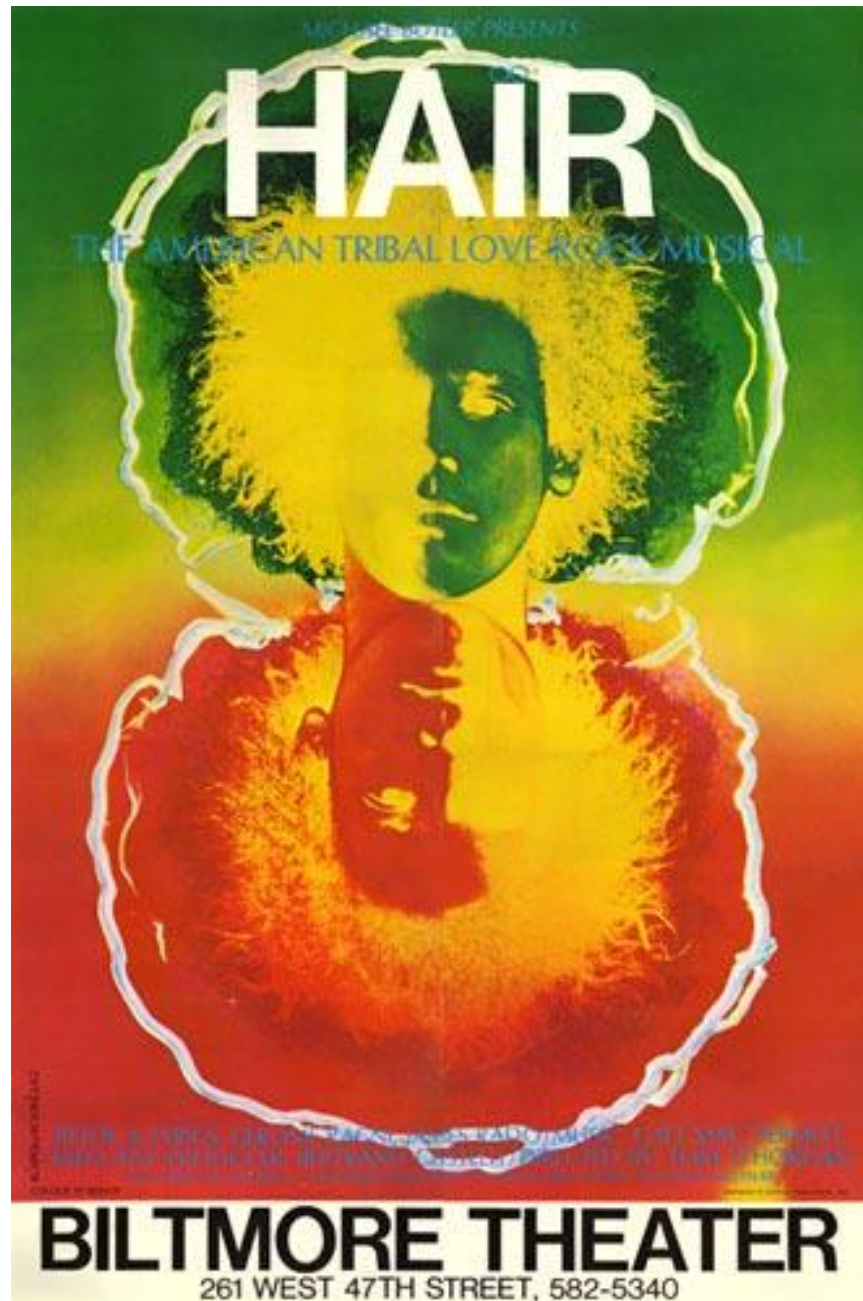
became familiar with the prevailing attitude of the theatre. When the wretched show first opened we gullibly took the advertised nudity and

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Doggett, *There's a Riot Going On: Revolutionaries, Rock Stars and the Rise and Fall of '60s Counter-Culture*, (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007), p.60.

<sup>9</sup> Farren, *Give the Anarchist*, p.205. Barry Miles has confirmed Farren's irritation at frequently being mistaken, chiefly due to his huge Afro hair-style, for a member of the *Hair* cast. Miles, *In the Sixties*, p.240.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Green, *Days in the Life*, p.207. 'Barnet' (a contraction of 'Barnet Fair') is a well-established Cockney rhyming slang term for 'hair'. 'Long barnet' is, therefore, 'long hair'.



*Hair* 'generic freak' image used for publicity in the USA and the UK.  
<http://www.hairtribes.com/> (accessed 27/03/2007).

audience participation as an open invitation to stroll into the auditorium and maybe even play an impromptu part in the proceedings. We discovered the error of our assumptions the first time we tried it, when we were immediately and bodily ejected by burly commissionaires who hadn't been told about the dawning of the age of Aquarius.<sup>11</sup>

Only later in the show's run would the residents of 212 Shaftesbury Avenue learn that they were causing 'some amusement among the cast of *Hair*, and even creating a minor polarisation between the straight actors simply *playing* freaks and the performers with ties to the rock/drug/counterculture who were doing the show for the pay cheque'. Sonja Kristina was a member of the *Hair* cast while Farren lived over the Shaftesbury. She was, Farren recounts, 'the only *Hair* inmate to figure out who and where we were and, after an initial enquiry and introduction', she 'became a regular visitor to the den of iniquity that lurked above'.<sup>12</sup>

Farren's acquaintances Russell Hunter – a former bandmate in The Deviants (and a subsequent member of underground group the Pink Fairies) – and Steve Mann, a typesetter for the underground press, have admitted to more disruptive direct action against *Hair*. Hunter has recounted that he and others entered the Shaftesbury during a performance 'with smokebombs [and] streamers' and caused 'general mayhem. We slipped in through the stage doors and started throwing things and shouting and yollicking and causing confusion'.<sup>13</sup> Mann had succeeded in procuring shipping distress flares, for which he 'could think of lots of practical applications'. 'The first one was when *Hair* opened', and Mann's motivation was entirely financial:

We all got very upset – we thought, 'There's these people, they're making an awful lot of money out of the hippies, and we want some.' It wasn't so much we wanted it for ourselves, but we did want to spread it around. We felt it would be very nice if they contributed 1% of their weekly take to underground groups [such as] the Arts Lab [or] whoever thought they deserved it. This was proposed to them but they turned it down. So to show our disapproval we started off by picketing it, but that didn't do any good. Then I had these smoke flares, so every so often I'd just burst in through an exit door, lob a smoke flare into the audience, then run out again. I did this two or three times.

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<sup>11</sup> Farren, *Give the Anarchist*, pp.205.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.205-6.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Green, *Days in the Life*, p.207.

Mann was presumably never identified as the culprit because he attended, in his capacity as the music editor of *International Times*, the presentation of a silver disc to the *Hair* company to mark 250,000 sales of the London cast album.

Amidst the throng, he and *IT* colleague Paul Lewis stole the disc:

Paul stuffed it under his jumper and we walked out. Then we thought, 'Well, let's see what we can do about this,' and we phoned them up and said 'We've got your silver disc and we're holding it to ransom.' They said, 'It doesn't concern us – Polydor [Records] will just give us another one. If you play it, it isn't even a copy of *Hair*. They get any old album, spray it silver and it'll cost them about 17/6 to come up with another one.' So that didn't really work.<sup>14</sup>

Mann, Lewis and Farren persevered with, and escalated, their campaign against *Hair*, using their *IT* connections to maximize publicity amongst the counter-cultural community. Now formally constituted into Britain's very own White Panther Party, Farren and friends issued, through *IT*, their 'Ultimatum for Hair: "1% or else"'. *IT* reported that on 2 November 1970 no fewer than '50 Panthers' – a perhaps somewhat generous estimate – 'handed out leaflets demanding 1% of Hair's profits (ie, £3,000)' during the show's interval. The theatre management 'pretty soon got uptight at the sight of all the dirty hippies mingling with the rich tourist audience and proceeded to throw them out,' whereupon 'about 15 pigs' arrived. One of this group of police (initially disparaged with the hippy terminology of 'pigs') won the prompt approval of *IT*, as reflected in its shift in nomenclature in the space of one sentence: upon concluding that the protest 'appears to be a peaceful demonstration ... so there's nothing we can do', the 'pig' was re-assessed as a benevolent London 'Bobby'. When the theatre manager 'rushed out to say that half a dozen Panthers had gone in through the stage door & were in the auditorium disrupting the show', however, it would once again be 'the pigs' who 'eventually managed to chase them out'. With a parting cry that 'we're only asking for 1% of the money that's been made out of the freak community to be returned to the freak community', the White Panther 'freaks' duly 'split'. During the following evening's performance, however, one anonymous 'freak' returned and 'threw a smoke bomb into the dress circle'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p.208.

<sup>15</sup> *International Times*, No. 92, 20/11-3/12/1970.

Who were these 'White Panthers'? In the same edition of *IT*, Farren's group published their second 'Party Report'. Believing 'that a police state was coming', Farren, inspired by the Detroit-based American White Panthers, had established a British equivalent.<sup>16</sup> The US White Panther Party, led by John Sinclair (manager of the aggressively proto-punk counter-cultural group the MC5) had defined themselves as vehemently anti-racist, counter-cultural revolutionaries 'in emulation of the American Black Panthers'.<sup>17</sup> The British White Panthers were also inspired by the Situationist tactics of another American grouping, Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin's Youth International Party or Yippies, who had cheerfully embraced television for publicity and media manipulation.<sup>18</sup> Farren's White Panthers, accurately summarized by Robert Hewison as 'a pale British imitation of the *enragés* of Paris or Watts', were to prove neither long-lived nor significant as a movement.<sup>19</sup>

On 7 November 1970, however, they enjoyed a moment of national prominence by 'hi-jacking' the Saturday night talk-show hosted by the then ubiquitous transatlantic television personality David Frost, and broadcast to London and some other parts of the national ITV network.<sup>20</sup> Frost was scheduled to interview Jerry Rubin who, according to *IT*, was visiting Britain 'for talks with the British underground press and various active revolutionary groups with the object of forming a closer relationship between Yippie and the British groups'. Rubin and the London-based Counter-Culturalists had decided to target Frost's show as a 'prime example of plastic, personality-cult, narcotic TV. Jerry had 14 tickets, which were distributed among the luminaries of the British underground at a pre-show meeting to discuss tactics'. Those 'luminaries', including Farren, Lewis, Mann, Caroline Coon, and Richard Neville and Felix Dennis of Oz, had, along with 'dozens more planned the strategy of getting people without tickets into the studio'. The plan succeeded and,

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<sup>16</sup> Miles, *In the Sixties*, p.240.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.240; Doggett, *There's a Riot*, pp.229-30, 74-75.

<sup>18</sup> *The Times*, 10/11/1970. On the Yippies, Hoffman and Rubin, see Doggett, *There's a Riot*, particularly pp.134-142.

<sup>19</sup> Hewison, *Too Much*, p.176.

<sup>20</sup> *International Times*, No. 92, 20/11-3/12/1970; *The Frost Programme: Jerry Rubin and Robert Ardrey*, London Weekend Television, first broadcast 7/11/1970, *British Film Institute Film & TV Database*, <http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/20796> (accessed 22/01/2010).

as the papers had it, Frost was destroyed and the public outraged. The dialogue was absurd – Frost asking for logical expositions of the alternative culture, while the freaks smoked dope and cavorted. The freakout was terminated with a commercial break.<sup>21</sup>

Frost did give Rubin an opportunity to explain the transatlantic counter-cultural agenda to a Saturday night television audience, but concluded that the takeover of the show would have won few converts.<sup>22</sup> Rubin, however, according to *IT*, ‘reckoned it was the best use of media he’d ever been involved in’.

The British White Panther Party, although buoyed by their moment of wide-spread national publicity consequent on their involvement in this televisual invasion, chose to make their campaign against *Hair* the most prominent item in the *IT* ‘Party Report’, which began by announcing that

*The time is for coming together ... for re-taking what is ours, to reclaim what we were robbed of before we were born. Seize the time. All power to the people. Power to all the people.*

After confirming that ‘a provisional central committee’, led by Mick and Joy Farren, Paul Lewis and Steve Mann had been formed, which would operate ‘from the offices of *IT*’, the Panthers expressed surprise and delight at ‘the emergence of YIPPIE in Britain’. They further declared their ‘total identification and support for YIP and all revolutionary groups around the world including the IRA, the Black Panthers and the Vietcong’.

The third point in their programme was a re-statement of the anti-*Hair* campaign. The Panthers, intent on ‘robbing the rich to feed the poor’, demanded that 1% of the show’s British profits ‘be given back to the community “Hair” is exploiting’.<sup>23</sup> This seems a rather selective – and, in wider financial terms, rather modest – targeting of the myriad of cultural products and producers which could also have been accused of ‘exploiting’ the counter-cultural ‘community’. No parallel demand was made, for example, for 1% of the weekly earnings of the Rolling Stones, who had abandoned their Rhythm and Blues roots to become late converts to the

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<sup>21</sup> *International Times*, No. 92, 20/11-3/12/1970.

<sup>22</sup> *The Times*, 10/11/1970.

<sup>23</sup> *International Times*, No. 92, 20/11-3/12/1970. Italics in original.

world of psychedelia with the release of their *Sgt. Pepper*-esque LP *Their Satanic Majesties Request* in December 1967. Nor did the Panthers demand 1% of the profits of The Who's *Tommy*, despite Townshend's apparent sympathy with and popularity amongst the Counter-Culturalists. Silver or Gold discs for the vast sales of albums by the Stones or The Who were not to be 'held to ransom'.

Most significantly, no demand was made for regular financial support – or recompense – from The Beatles. A tiny percentage of the publishing rights of the Lennon-McCartney song-writing partnership would have far exceeded 1% of the weekly box-office take at the Shaftesbury Theatre. The Beatles did make small *ad hoc* financial contributions towards counter-cultural causes. Jonathon Green, like Barry Miles and Dominic Sandbrook, has noted that 'in terms of hands-on involvement with the counter-culture ... Paul McCartney, via his friend Miles, was a definite presence, offering money or merely DIY skills'.<sup>24</sup> McCartney had assisted in the establishment of Miles and John Dunbar's Indica bookshop and art-gallery when he 'helped to put up the shop's bookshelves, drew its flyers and designed its wrapping paper. Later, when Indica ran into difficulties, he lent his friends several thousand pounds to pay their creditors'.<sup>25</sup> Miles also received a cheque for £200 from McCartney on 'the day of the big world-wide transmission of "All You Need Is Love"'; 25 June 1967.<sup>26</sup> This donation helped to keep *International Times* afloat during a period of cash-flow difficulties, as would later *ad hoc* donations from Pete Townshend.<sup>27</sup> McCartney also instigated the series of interviews with leading rock-stars that became a semi-regular feature of *IT* and helped to boost its sales.<sup>28</sup> These actions have led many to conclude that, while 'by the end of the decade' John Lennon was the Beatle 'most openly identified with the counter-culture', it was McCartney who 'was more deeply immersed in the world of the counter-culture than almost any other British pop musician of the period'.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Green, *All Dressed Up*, p.421.

<sup>25</sup> Sandbrook, *White Heat*, p.526.

<sup>26</sup> The Beatles' performance and recording of 'All You Need Is Love' formed the BBC's contribution to *Our World*, the first international satellite television broadcast which was seen by '400 million people in 23 countries'. Neville, *Play Power*, p.222.

<sup>27</sup> Green, *Days in the Life*, p.212; Farren, *Give the Anarchist*, pp.110-1.

<sup>28</sup> Green, *Days in the Life*, p.212.

<sup>29</sup> Green, *All Dressed Up*, p.421; Sandbrook, *White Heat*, p.526.

As Green highlights, The Beatles also made 'one (relatively) united play for what must, if only by default, be seen as their own form of counter-culture: Apple'. The aim of Apple Corp, founded in 1968, was, 'it was loudly announced ... essentially charitable. The Beatles' money would be on offer for the right sort of applicants. People who had something new, something interesting, something alternative to offer'. McCartney sought, through Apple, to stimulate "a controlled weirdness ... a kind of Western Communism". "We want to help people", he announced to the press, "but without doing it like a charity". Yet whilst idealistic, Apple was never truly altruistic. It was predicated upon 'the need to use up some two million pounds in revenue, which might otherwise be decimated by the demands of the taxman'. The Beatles did not use Apple to give away their own money, but rather profits that were already earmarked for The Inland Revenue. Even Green concedes that Apple was, in fact, 'a tax dodge', which was 'effectively dead two years later'.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to the praise given to The Beatles for their sporadic and fluctuating contributions to counter-cultural causes, the conspicuous wealth of *Hair* producer Michael Butler attracted hatred from the British White Panthers, and scepticism even from the mainstream British press. The *Daily Mail* reported in 1970 that Butler had 'staked his last £100,000 on staging' *Hair*. Butler is quoted as stating that "if it had failed, I would have been completely wiped out" ... Instead, it made him a millionaire. He controls productions running in seven American cities and nine other countries and new ones opening every six weeks'. The *Mail* was, therefore, perplexed that '*Hair* has become something of a model for hippy living' while 'Mr. Butler is not a hippy himself, but he comes about as close as a fifth generation millionaire can'.<sup>31</sup> Butler, however, seems to have been entirely comfortable with his new status as a twentieth-century patron of the arts: by 1972 he was content to be described to Broadway theatre-goers as '*A Medici of the Counter Culture*' who 'is thought of by those around him as a bridge between new talent and those able to give that talent exposure'. That objective chimes with Paul McCartney's aspirations for Apple, as does Butler's diversification into retail

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<sup>30</sup> Green, *All Dressed Up*, p.421-3.

<sup>31</sup> "How Mr Hair Made A Million", *Daily Mail*, 21/02/1970.



interests such as 'Butler's Great Harmony, an organic restaurant and boutique on East 60<sup>th</sup> Street' which was cited for the New York *Hair* audience as 'evidence of the versatility of this "21<sup>st</sup> Century Renaissance Man"'.<sup>32</sup> Thus Butler, despite his vast wealth, still considered himself and his show to be firmly of the counter-culture, while the 'luminary' English Counter-Culturalists were adamant – even violently so – that he and *Hair* were not. Butler, to them, was a profiteer.

Is it possible to resolve what rapidly became an overheated debate over how genuinely 'counter-cultural' *Hair* was? Clive Barnes of *The New York Times* had already, in his 1968 Broadway review, brought some sage balance to bear on the question. Barnes reminded his readers that audiences did not have to approve of the counter-cultural or hippie life portrayed 'any more than you have to approve of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to enjoy "Rose Marie"'. On the other hand, however, while 'you probably don't have to be a supporter of Eugene McCarthy to love it', Barnes did not give *Hair* 'much chance among the adherents of Governor Reagan'.<sup>33</sup>

West End actress Marianne Price concurs with Barnes, and refutes the attacks upon the credibility of *Hair* from Farren and his fellow Counter-Culturalists. Price recalls vividly 'how shocking many of our audiences found the show, some even walking out halfway through, before and after the famous nude scene', and that she and her fellow cast and crew members 'absolutely' considered themselves to be part of an artistically revolutionary show. Indeed, 'we were told that at the time, but we knew it as we had all seen the show and realised that this was something

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<sup>32</sup> 'Last Broadway *Hair* Playbill', quoted in Johnson, *Good Hair*, p.174.

<sup>33</sup> *New York Times*, 29/04/1968. *Rose Marie* (1924) was an operetta set in the Canadian Rockies with music by Rudolf Friml and Herbert Stothart and book and lyrics by Otto Harbach and Oscar Hammerstein II. Resembling the musical and dramatic style of Sigmund Romberg, it ran on Broadway between 1924 and 1926. Eugene J. McCarthy (1916-2005) was a Democratic member of the US Congress and Senate who stood unsuccessfully for the Presidency on five occasions. His most significant contribution to US politics came in 1968 when, on a strongly anti-Vietnam War policy platform, he sought the Democratic candidature for the office of President in opposition to incumbent Democrat President Lyndon Baines Johnson. While the Democratic nomination would go to Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, McCarthy's strong showing against Johnson in the early New Hampshire primary has been credited as influencing Johnson's decision not to contest the 1968 Presidential election. See Dominic Sandbrook, *Eugene McCarthy and the Rise and Fall of Postwar American Liberalism*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004). Former Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan was, in 1968, the recently-elected, staunchly conservative Republican Governor of California. He would serve as the 40<sup>th</sup> President of the United States between 1981 and 1989.

that had never ever been staged before'. *Hair* 'was on everyone's lips as it was so different to the mould' and, through its content, style and instigation of the new genre of Rock Opera, 'was changing the shape of theatre for ever'.

For Price, *Hair* was a statement of political as well as artistic intent. 'Some people', she has recalled, 'did regard what we were doing to be revolutionary in the political sense'. She recounts that 'some of us were active (myself included)' in 'demonstrations that took place in London at the time, for example to free Nelson Mandela, and also with writing letters' to campaign on 'environmental issues' such as 'saving the whale', and in support of 'a woman's right to chose to have an abortion. Also we were anti the Vietnam war. People would sometimes come to the stage door and ask us to sign petitions on various issues, and if we felt we supported the cause', such as opposition to 'animal testing ... we would sign'. Indeed, *Hair* gave Price an opportunity to invest her own political experiences and beliefs into her theatrical performance:

I was in the chorus and understudied the role of Sheila, the radical character who in the story was involved in left-wing politics, rallying against the Vietnam war, something which I was previously involved with myself during the late 60's, as I was at the anti war demonstration at Grosvenor Square.<sup>34</sup>

As a result, and notwithstanding the rejection of them by Farren, Green and *IT*, young Marianne and many of her colleagues considered themselves to be firmly within the broad church of the counter-culture. Price presents their case with logic, eloquence and conviction:

We were very anti establishment and wanted to be seen and heard and as young people to be a part of the change in society that was starting to take place. Being from a working class background (I and many of the cast were), was not going to stop someone get on in life, like it had done before and I felt that for me the show was getting us all noticed and people were listening to what we had to say about society in the words of the songs and script of the show.

Price has also addressed directly the apparent incongruity of the content of *Hair* within the often conservative *milieu* of commercial London theatre:

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<sup>34</sup> Price, letter, 13/04/2006.

Yes there was a contradiction in working in the West End, but the West End was changing and we used it as a platform to be able to air our views and express ourselves on that platform. So in a way it was crucial to be in the West End and to get the message of the show out which was primarily anti war, and anti Vietnam. This was given out to thousands of people who saw the show and who then went away thinking about what they had seen and heard and for many it changed their views politically.<sup>35</sup>

Price may over-state her case when she claims that ‘many’ had their political views changed as a direct result of *Hair*, but her statement that ‘thousands’ were given, at the very least, cause to think about the issues it raised is surely valid. A message was being preached from the stage of the Shaftesbury, and chiefly to a congregation of the unconverted – some of whom may, conceivably, have been ripe for conversion – rather than to the often enclosed and exclusive church of the self-defined Counter-Culturalists.

Charles Marowitz, ‘American man-of-the-theatre and protagonist of Theatre of Cruelty’, likewise noted this phenomenon of disjuncture between content and audience when he reviewed *Hair* for *Plays and Players* magazine.<sup>36</sup> Marowitz was struck that ‘the pop music and mixed-media effects’ alongside ‘the inevitable paraphernalia of the London freak-out’ meant ‘more to an uninitiated theatergoing public than it does to those hipsters who have blinked through UFO evenings and the psychedelic jamborees of Alexandra Palace and Middle Earth’.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Marowitz was ‘a little alarmed when a conventional strobe-effect gets a round of applause as if it were a breathtaking coup-de-theâtre’, until he realized ‘that for many in that West End audience, the “underground” was ‘surfacing for the first time.’ Unlike the Counter-Culturalists, but like Marianne Price, Marowitz viewed this as a cause for artistic and political celebration. *Hair* was ‘a breakthrough in the musical form because it has, quite literally, shattered the standing musical comedy conventions.’ Marowitz berated those who yearned ‘for the well-threaded lyrics of an Oscar Hammerstein when all around ... language is in fission’ and,

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<sup>35</sup> Price, email, 16/06/2006.

<sup>36</sup> Marwick, *The Sixties*, p.357. Marwick offers a very brief definition of the influential concept of the ‘theatre of cruelty’, summarizing the theories of French director Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), expressed in his seminal *The Theatre and its Double* of 1938, as a call ‘for a return to the primitive and the ritualistic in drama’. *The Sixties*, p.342.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.357; *Plays and Players*, Vol. 16 No.2, November 1968.

rather, praised *Hair's* ability to encapsulate and convey the 'slogans and shibboleths' which he considered to be nothing less than 'the diction of the twentieth century'. Marowitz was, however, equally scathing of the humourlessness of much 'experimental' theatre and the more morose Counter-Culturalists who denigrated *Hair*. While noting parallels with 'Living Theatre's *Paradise Now*, which *Hair* strongly resembles', Marowitz was left in no doubt that it was the latter which was 'the most powerful piece of anti-war propaganda yet to come out of America'. Crucially, Marowitz concluded that 'unlike the Living Theatre's po-faced essays on similar themes, *Hair* makes its points through comedy and celebration'.<sup>38</sup>

Somewhat surprisingly, Marowitz and Price had an ally in John Barber, the theatre critic of the conservative *Daily Telegraph*. Barber used his review to encourage tolerance both of *Hair's* theatrical *bravura* and of its political message, in a manner which also served to rebut many of the criticisms of the Counter-Culturalists. Barber considered it important, at a time when 'the theatre may be ... ailing', to assess the appeal of 'the biggest hit in London' which, he felt, 'cannot be dismissed as vulgar rubbish which is drawing crowds only because it has a brief scene showing naked bodies'. Barber identified two elements central to *Hair's* appeal. The first was its subject-matter, which he crystallized as 'a fantastic yet accurate and sympathetic picture of those among today's young people who are naïve enough, or shrewd enough, to be so disgusted with the soullessness of modern society as to rebel against it'. Barber opined that 'to mere parents and onlookers, the interest of this is as great as to those for whom it speaks'. The 'second appeal of "Hair"' lay in its brazen and total theatricality, which some have found, understandably enough, so overwhelming as to be distasteful'. Barber encouraged his readers to open their minds to the new theatrical techniques and vocabulary which *Hair* presented to West End audiences. He was blunt in his assessment that 'bored audiences have stopped going to plays set in drawing-rooms, plays about dimly indecisive descendents of Chekhov's maunderers, plays about the suburban problems of anguished Ibsenities'. In Barber's opinion, it was

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<sup>38</sup> *Plays and Players*, Vol.16 No.2, November 1968.

now 'the crude, the larger-than-life ... which enthral audiences', just as for Marowitz theatre had now 'become a meeting-point for stylistic collisions and aesthetic jumble'.<sup>39</sup> These elements had been successfully synthesized in *Hair* to produce what Irving Wardle celebrated in *The Times* as 'the joyous sound of a group of people telling the world exactly what they feel'.<sup>40</sup>

The underground press, in contrast, could muster only muted praise of *Hair* in 1968; a position which hardened over the next two years into first contempt and then outright criticism. *IT* offered a very grudgingly positive review of *Hair*'s opening in the West End, concluding with the 'verdict – it works.' In a lengthy interview entitled 'Hair Roots' in the same edition, Tom O'Horgan was given the opportunity to extol the virtues of LSD, and the creative possibilities opened up by the integration of dance, song and on-stage musical instruments into theatrical productions. Asked by his interviewer Lee Harris if there was 'no way of smashing the commercial set-up that is Broadway?', O'Horgan did, at least, embrace fully the premise of the question by responding that 'the crap that is put on in the name of professional theatre is astounding'. This article, in which O'Horgan displayed impeccable counter-cultural credentials in reply to all the key artistic, political and drug-related issues which are put to him, begins above a half-page advert from RCA records. This presents the two words 'Sodomy' and 'Hashish' in a huge typeface, followed by 'and 24 more hair raising tracks on the original Broadway cast recording of HAIR on RCA'. *IT* was, therefore, perfectly happy to give considerable space to the director of the show and to take the advertising revenue from its highly-profitable American record-label.<sup>41</sup>

Oz magazine also offered a grudgingly positive initial response to *Hair*. In May 1968 it called the Broadway production 'the only thing worth going uptown for', and 'a fast furious blend of love, hate, nudity, sex, satire, soul, pot and revolution'. Oz noted that, 'for a start, the leading lady Sheila lives with two men at once – which is a long way from "West Side Story"', and seemed content to see 'the

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<sup>39</sup> 'Let's Be Fair To "Hair"', *The Daily Telegraph*, 25/11/1968; Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> *The Times*, 28/09/1968.

<sup>41</sup> *International Times*, No.41, 4-17/10/1968.

middle class audiences roar their crew-cutted heads off at lines like “Let’s have a suck in for peace”<sup>42</sup>. Further half-hearted approval came in late 1969 when Oz summarized *Hair* as ‘not exactly to hippies what Das Kapital is to socialists’. Yet ‘even at its most corrupted’, Oz conceded, ‘*Hair* generally reflects the Underground’s beliefs that one’s politics and lifestyle should be identical’.<sup>43</sup>

Opinion had shifted, however, by late 1970, in the wake of Gloria Stewart’s dismissal after her *Black and White Minstrel Show* protest, and thanks to an interview given to Oz by ex-cast member Kate Garrett, also recently fired from the cast. The two-page interview, entitled ‘Love Rock Tribal Schlock’, ran underneath of photograph of Garrett sitting cross-legged, sneering and giving a V sign, in front of a cast list of the *Hair* Tribe with her name crossed out. Garrett was, she stated, dismissed from ‘the “Amerikan love-rock musical” [*sic*] because the Company Manager suspected me of smoking a joint on the premises. I had indeed smoked many a joint on the premises, but on that particular occasion I wasn’t’. London producer James Verner nonetheless sacked her ‘from my thirty quid a week groovy carefree fun job at the Shaftesbury to the hard world of six quid a week off the dole’. Her response was a sense of ‘relief’. ‘I realise’, Garrett told Oz, ‘that “Hair” has been sneered at by a lot of people for a long time now’, but she had ‘dug what the words to the songs said’ on first seeing the show. She had ‘never really ... gone into the hard facts behind capitalism before’. Therefore, ‘when they gave me a part, I really wanted to know’.<sup>44</sup>

A series of events had, however, left Garrett profoundly disillusioned. As a result, she felt that *Hair* had become a ‘sick joke’ and, while she was ‘not saying these things to get back at them for sacking me’ she felt she ‘must make a protest’. Garrett noted that ““The Flag” scene, in which the piss was soundly taken out of the stars ‘n’ stripes was cut recently because it “wasn’t working”. Probably one of the most politically significant scenes in the show, it used to upset the Amerikan [*sic*] tourists something rotten, so sometimes they’d walk out’. Garrett had

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<sup>42</sup> Oz number 12, May 1968.

<sup>43</sup> Oz number 25, December 1969.

<sup>44</sup> Oz number 30, October 1970. ‘To dig’, in hippy parlance, meant to enjoy, or even to support.

concluded, therefore, that the scene had been cut because it was ‘bad for business’. Likewise, the cast ‘were told to cut out the “embarrassing masturbation” on stage’, something which she had ‘dug most’ on first seeing *Hair*. ‘This was replaced by well-timed smutty sketches and one or two gyrating chicks well-positioned downstage’.

Most of Garrett’s grievances, however, related to management attitudes towards the use of marijuana. She told Oz that a young cast member had been fired for smoking dope on the roof of the theatre, only to be replaced by another young actor on less favourable or secure terms. ‘This’, she notes, ‘is how Verner protects himself contractually, and it’s a drag’. Producer Verner was, for Garrett, a ‘ruthless bread head’ – one whose only concern was making a profit – who was ‘hiding behind a show preaching peace and light’. On occasions ‘some members of the Tribe would come into the theatre during the days and smoke ... on the roof’, but the Shaftesbury had ‘never been raided’. Indeed, ‘two years ago when the show was much talked about, most of the kids were heads, but the fuzz didn’t even seem curious about the possibility of dope on the premises’ at a time when ‘they could have had a bean feast’. Garrett also claims that Verner’s suspicion that the Wardrobe Mistress might be dealing drugs led to her dismissal ‘for “inefficiency”’.

Garrett concedes that drug use on the premises of the Shaftesbury was ‘illegal and Verner claims that if the theatre was bust it would be closed down’.<sup>45</sup> Whether or not this was a pretext for heavy-handed management practice, it was the crux of the matter. Fines and jail sentences for mere possession of cannabis or amphetamines were considerably lighter than those handed down to anyone who allowed drugs to be consumed on their premises. This had been demonstrated most notoriously by the ‘Redlands bust’ of May 1967 at the country home of Keith Richards, of the Rolling Stones. Richards and Mick Jagger, along with art dealer Robert Fraser, were sentenced to prison terms in June 1967 before Jagger and Richards’s convictions were overturned.<sup>46</sup> While Jagger had received

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Marwick, *The Sixties*, p.488.

a three-month sentence for possession of four amphetamine pills, it was Richards, found guilty of 'allowing his home to be used for the purpose of smoking cannabis', who received the more severe prison sentence of one year (subsequently quashed on appeal).<sup>47</sup> James Verner was therefore justified in his assumption that had the premises been raided by police the results would have been closure of the show; loss of employment for the entire company; probable criminal prosecution and a jail sentence for him, and the possible loss of the Shaftesbury Theatre's licence. Nonetheless, Garrett's experience in the London production of *Hair* had 'left a slightly bitter taste' in her mouth.<sup>48</sup>

Several theatre critics who had praised *Hair* on its opening in 1968 also experienced an unpleasant after-taste on its prompt revival in the West End at the Queen's Theatre in 1974. Frank Marcus of *The Sunday Telegraph*, for example, wrote about it forlornly under the headline 'Greying Hair'. The sole producer on this occasion was Robert Stigwood, who had recently invested heavily in the global success of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and would co-produce the movie of *Tommy*. Marcus wondered if 'Stigwood's accountant or his psychiatrist' held the clue to the reasoning behind the swift revival. 'True', Marcus conceded, *Hair's* closure in 1973 'after the end of an immensely long run ... came abruptly due to the collapse of the theatre's roof, but by then the show had become as stale as old cheese and its message totally irrelevant'. Marcus believed, presciently, that *Hair's* 'status as a genuine cultural totem of the 'Sixties – a decade destined surely to become legendary – was never in question ... It was in its day both an expression and an extension of life'. 'Apart from Galt MacDermot's excellent score', however, he was now struck by 'how little of the excitement has remained. Attempts at updating are ludicrous. Draft-dodging is no longer a controversial activity'. Unable to foresee that the Rolling Stones would still be recording and filling stadiums world-wide in the twenty-first century, Marcus also found that the 'idolatry extended to a husband and father of mature years called Mick Jagger seems pathetic'. He felt 'pity' for 'the well-drilled cast', who,

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<sup>47</sup> For a detailed account of the 'Redlands bust', the subsequent trial and the intense media debate it provoked see Sandbrook, *White Heat*, pp.546-8, 552-6.

<sup>48</sup> *Oz* number 30, October 1970.



stranded in a limbo that is neither art nor life ... dutifully dragged reluctant members of the audience onto the stage for the final Dionysian rites. Just before that, the sign of the cross is held aloft in a shaft of light. Using hindsight, we now know that [*Hair*] did not herald a massive return of the young to Christianity, but a new theatrical fad; namely, a spate of rock musicals based on the Bible.

Marcus concluded that 'the many imitation outgrowths of "Hair" have depleted the pioneer work'. He found the whole experience to be 'very melancholy'.<sup>49</sup>

The critic Benedict Nightingale had also praised *Hair* in 1968, likewise placing particular emphasis on its religious subtext and imagery when he called it 'a sung Eucharist in praise of the secular gods'. The 1974 revival, however, he considered to be 'maudlin and witless: a celebration, yes, but of "driveling parasites who drift from half-felt experience to half-felt experience, half-formed belief to half-formed belief"'. Thirty-five years later he would explain that his 'excuse was that the cynical 1970s had replaced the optimistic 1960s'.<sup>50</sup>

Likewise, Marianne Price, a member of the 1974 revival cast, is, with the benefit of hindsight, not overly surprised that the tide of theatrical fashion had begun to turn away from *Hair*. She believes that this was due to a change in 'the political climate at that time in history'. Although the United States was moving towards disentanglement from the morass of Vietnam, the wider anti-war message of the piece did, she believed at the time, continue to resonate. 'Unfortunately', however, 'the era of love and peace seemed to die when *Hair* was taken off'. Just as Marcus, in 1974, spoke of *Hair* in the past tense – as a piece which had already 'had its day' – so Price has conceded that 'it was a show of its time' which had become 'a period piece and should be presented as such'.<sup>51</sup>

## 6.2 *Hair* and its creators since the 1970s

The Counter-Culturalists' perception that *Hair* was a cynical, formulaic exercise in attracting a mass, mainstream audience sits poorly with the fate of its creators in subsequent years; none of whom were able to replicate its success. Mick Brown

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<sup>49</sup> *The Sunday Telegraph*, 30/06/1974.

<sup>50</sup> *The Times*, 29/03/2010.

<sup>51</sup> Price, email, 16/06/2006.

of *The Independent*, writing in 2010, judged, politely, that *Hair* 'proved a hard act to follow'.<sup>52</sup> In fact, its creators were responsible for some of the most expensive flops in the history of Broadway musicals. All were staged while *Hair* was still in its pomp on both sides of the Atlantic, but their reception, by critics and audiences, became poorer and poorer, whilst the financial fate of each new show became increasingly dire.

In 1971, the Public Theater staged a warmly-received musical adaptation of Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona* with music by Galt MacDermot, book adaptation by John Guare and Mel Shapiro and lyrics by Guare. It opened at the Public's outdoor Delacorte auditorium in Central Park on 27 July 1971 and transferred to the St. James Theater on Broadway on 1 December 1971, where it ran for a respectable 627 performances and closed on 20 May 1973. Unlike *Hair*, it succeeded, in 1972, in winning both the New York Drama Critic' Circle Award and the Tony Award for Best Musical. The production then spawned a London transfer which opened at the Phoenix Theatre in the West End on 26 April 1973 and played for a healthy 237 performances.<sup>53</sup> Scott Warfield has noted, however, that while critics 'raved' about the production of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 'only a few singled out MacDermot's music'.

Nonetheless, two further rock musicals with scores by Galt MacDermot, *Dude* and *Via Galactica*, opened on Broadway in 1972. Both suffered from what Warfield has described, temperately, as 'expensive, troubled productions. The score for *Dude* was praised, but the music for *Via Galactica* was seen as yet another step downward for MacDermot, who never had another Broadway hit'.<sup>54</sup> *Dude*, with book and lyrics by Gerome Ragni, opened at the Broadway Theatre in October 1972 and ran for only sixteen performances, at a loss of \$800,000.<sup>55</sup> *The New*

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<sup>52</sup> *The Independent*, 27/03/2010.

<sup>53</sup> Richards (ed.), *Great Rock Musicals*, pp.69-70; *BroadwayWorld International Database*, <http://broadwayworld.com/bwidb/sections/productions/index.php?var=7661>, (accessed 15/01/2010); *Internet Broadway Database*, <http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=3627> (accessed 15/01/2010); [http://www.guidetomusicaltheatre.com/shows\\_t/two\\_gentlemen.htm](http://www.guidetomusicaltheatre.com/shows_t/two_gentlemen.htm), (accessed 15/01/2010).

<sup>54</sup> Scott Warfield, 'From *Hair* to *Rent*: is 'rock' a four-letter word on Broadway?', William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.236.

<sup>55</sup> Miller, *Let The Sun*, p.79.

*York Times* speculated that *Dude* ‘may go down in theatrical history as Broadway’s most monumental disaster’.<sup>56</sup>

Just five weeks later, however, on 28 November 1972, MacDermot’s *Via Galactica*, ‘a space fantasy with lyrics by Christopher Gore and Judith Ross’, opened at the Uris Theater. Set in the year 2972, it ran for only seven performances and lost \$900,000: a then record-breaking loss chiefly due to the expense of a set that ‘consisted of six large trampolines, which were used to convey weightlessness, along with lots of smoke, lasers, and a flying spaceship’.<sup>57</sup> This disastrous production was directed Peter Hall; founder of the Royal Shakespeare Company and, from 1973, successor to Laurence Olivier as Artistic Director of the National Theatre. Clive Barnes of the *New York Times*, so supportive of *Hair*, was damning of *Via Galactica*, calling the story ‘appallingly weak’ and the dialogue ‘flat and platitudinous. Presumably everyone thought that with a truly sumptuous and adventurous staging, Mr. MacDermot’s music would do the trick. This was a miscalculation’.<sup>58</sup>

James Rado fared no better than Ragni or MacDermot in replicating the success of *Hair*. Rado’s desire to compose as well as write book and lyrics brought him into conflict with Ragni, and they parted company. In 1972 Rado and his brother Ted authored the musical *Rainbow*. ‘A form of sequel to *Hair*’, *Rainbow*’s ‘Claude-like hero, simply named “Man”, has, at the beginning of the show, just died in Vietnam and arrived in “Rainbow Land”’. *Rainbow*, which contained an astonishing 42 musical numbers, opened off-Broadway at the Orpheum Theatre on 18 December 1972. Despite the support of Clive Barnes in the *New York Times*, it ran for only 48 performances.<sup>59</sup>

Michael Butler contributed another intriguing theatrical disaster to the list of subsequent failures produced by the creative team behind *Hair*. In 1974 he

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<sup>56</sup> Cited in *The Independent*, 27/03/2010.

<sup>57</sup> Miller, *Let The Sun*, p.79; *Internet Broadway Database*, <http://www.ibdb.com/show.php?id=9083> (accessed 15/01/2010).

<sup>58</sup> Cited in Miller, *Let The Sun*, p.80.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.79-80; *BroadwayWorld International Database*, [http://broadwayworld.com/bwidb/productions/Rainbow\\_8345/](http://broadwayworld.com/bwidb/productions/Rainbow_8345/), (accessed 15/01/2010).

collaborated with John Phillips, formerly the chief song-writer of the four-piece vocal group The Mamas and The Papas.<sup>60</sup> Phillips, whose drug-use had, by the early to mid-1970s, become prodigious, was ‘obsessed with the idea of writing an opera set in space’ and had been inspired by the Apollo 11 moon landing of 1969. Phillips was perhaps unaware of the disastrous fate of the space-themed *Via Galactica*. The central role of what was to be called simply *Space* was written with none other than Elvis Presley in mind. Phillips successfully ‘pitched the idea to Michael Butler’, who hired a young director, the former dancer Michael Bennett.<sup>61</sup> According to music journalist Chris Campion, ‘for several months, Phillips’ mansion became a hive of activity. Brainstorming sessions were held in the library, a pile of cocaine available for anyone to dip into ... Unfortunately, it was not to be. Michael Butler pulled out of the project just as the final cast was to be approved’. Butler recalled to Campion that drugs and ‘a lot of paranoia ... made John very difficult to work with’. A proposal to turn the show ‘into a sci-fi comedy movie’ also foundered, despite some interest from actor Jack Nicholson and young film-maker George Lucas. Phillips would persevere, with artist Andy Warhol investing in the project – now entitled *Man on the Moon* – in place of Michael Butler. Warhol associate Paul Morrissey would eventually be credited as director after Bennett resigned during dress rehearsals. Record producer Harvey Goldberg attended one of the 43 preview performances at New York’s Off-Broadway Little Theater. “It was so bad that I couldn’t even bring myself to go

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<sup>60</sup> The Mamas and The Papas were Phillips, his wife Michelle, Denny Doherty and ‘Mama’ Cass Elliot. Schooled in the US folk-music revival of the mid-1960s, they worked together between 1965-68 and 1971-2. Their blend (similar to that of contemporaries The Byrds) of finely-honed close-harmonies with the rhythmic elements of post-Beatles ‘beat’ music achieved considerable commercial success. Phillips used his influence within the music industry to mount the Monterey International Pop Music Festival of June 1967 (at which The Who fully grabbed the attention of the *cognoscenti* of the US music-scene for the first time). The Mamas and The Papas represented, on both sides of the Atlantic, a face of West Coast folk-rock which was acceptable to a mainstream audience. The popularity of their recordings (and those of Elliot as a solo artist prior to her death from heart-failure in 1974) has endured in subsequent decades in part due to continued radio-play and use in the soundtracks of many television documentaries on ‘The Sixties’. Indeed, while their two most famous songs, ‘California Dreamin’ and ‘Monday Monday’, reached numbers 23 and three on the UK singles chart in 1966, the former was even more successful on its re-release in 1997, when it reached number nine.

<sup>61</sup> ‘King of the Wild Frontier’, Chris Campion, *The Observer Music Monthly*, No. 67, March 2009. Michael Bennett would take Broadway by storm within a year when he choreographed and directed the Pulitzer Prize-winning ensemble musical *A Chorus Line*. With book by James Kirkwood, Jr. and Nicholas Dante, lyrics by Edward Kleban and music by Marvin Hamlisch, *A Chorus Line* would become the longest-running Broadway musical at the time of its closure in 1990. Like *Hair*, it was first produced by Joseph Papp and the Public Theater.

backstage”, he remembers. “It was truly one of the worst things I’d ever seen”.  
Campion also cites Clive Barnes’ damning indictment of the show. On its official opening in January 1975, Barnes wrote in *The New York Times* that “for connoisseurs of the truly bad, *Man on the Moon* may be a small milestone”. The production closed after only two performances.<sup>62</sup>

James Rado and Gerome Ragni were reconciled in the mid-1970s and wrote *Sun* with composer Steve Margoshes (who would go on to orchestrate *Tommy* for Broadway in the 1990s). *Sun* has never been fully staged. Gerome Ragni died of cancer at the age of 48 in 1991, having never come close to repeating the early success he enjoyed as co-creator of *Hair*.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, as will be addressed in Chapter Seven, while a great many Rock Operas were produced in the years immediately after the initial success of *Hair*, enthusiasm for the genre had waned considerably by the middle of the 1970s. By the time of Ragni’s death it had almost disappeared. *The Who’s Tommy* (now given a lavish commercial staging) would finally reach Broadway in 1993 and London in 1996. Also in 1996, Jonathon Larson’s *Rent* would premiere on Broadway. In 1998, thirty years after *Hair*’s UK premiere in the same venue, *Rent* began a successful eighteen-month run at London’s Shaftesbury Theatre. As will be considered in Chapter Ten, *The Who’s Tommy* and *Rent* briefly revived interest in the artistic and commercial possibilities of works which proudly described themselves as Rock Operas. Between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, however, rock music in the commercial theatre was, as Scott Warfield put it, ‘a four-letter word’. A considerable share of the blame for this must be apportioned to Ragni, Rado, MacDermot and Butler and the profligate, high-profile failures of *Man on the Moon*, *Rainbow*, *Via Galactica* and *Dude*.

Moreover, Warfield identified an increasingly illogical and gratuitous use of rock scores as a central problem for the future development of the Rock Opera genre beyond the mid-1970s. The musical vocabulary of late 1960s pop-rock was a natural fit for the contemporary, youthful subject matter of *Hair*. As Chapter

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> *The Independent*, 27/03/2010.

Eleven will address, the deliberately ambivalent historical setting of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, combined with Tim Rice's occasional but consistent use of a demotic argot rooted firmly in the late 1960s and early 1970s also provided a logical stylistic match between libretto and music. As the immediate 'post-Hair wave', which will be considered in the next chapter, demonstrated, however, 'although a few shows may have succeeded' due to

the novelty of contemporary sounds, the key to a winning production remained the integration of rock music with the book and the staging. Reviews of failed rock musicals in the 1970s suggest that there was often no compelling reason for the use of rock in a particular show and, moreover, that the music itself was frequently not very good. Admittedly, those productions usually also had serious problems with their books, staging and other elements, but it is almost impossible to find a failed rock musical in which critics praised the music and condemned the rest of the show. In short, the fate of a rock musical hung chiefly on its music, which had to be both good – or at least inoffensive – and relevant in some way to the action on stage.<sup>64</sup>

Michael Coveney, theatre critic and biographer of Andrew Lloyd Webber, has concurred, confirming that, in his extensive experience, 'critics always say that the most important element in a musical is the libretto, or book. Audiences don't care about this so much if the music is good'.<sup>65</sup> As the high proportion of expensive flops of the 1970s demonstrate, some theatrical producers 'seemed to treat rock music as just another element that could be grafted onto a big-budget musical, and the results were sometimes spectacular failures'.<sup>66</sup>

*Hair* continued to be revived on a smaller scale around the world throughout the 1970s and beyond, and was released as a film in 1979, directed by Miloš Forman and distributed by United Artists, to a muted critical and commercial reception. The reputation of the show languished in the doldrums which it seemed to have entered around 1974 or 1975. Despite being directed by O'Horgan and produced by Butler, a Broadway revival in 1977, again at the Biltmore Theater, received negative reviews and ran for only 43 performances. In Britain there have been several high-profile revivals in the decades since, 'some of which have tried to

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<sup>64</sup> Warfield, 'From *Hair*', *Cambridge Companion*, p.240.

<sup>65</sup> *The Independent*, 15/04/2010.

<sup>66</sup> Warfield, 'From *Hair*', *Cambridge Companion*, p.240.

restyle the show in a calculated attempt to make it relevant to contemporary audiences'. A 1989 Bill Kenwright production, for example, 'included a scene where the cleaned-up hippies regroup at the Washington War Memorial 22 years on to pay their respects to Claude'; an updated conclusion which James Rado subsequently conceded was a "big mistake".<sup>67</sup> Michael Bogdanov's 1993 production struggled in the large space of London's Old Vic theatre, which prevented the necessary proximity of cast and audience which *Hair*, in the opinion of former Claude Paul Nicholas, requires in order for the action to be 'in the audience's face a bit'.<sup>68</sup> Benedict Nightingale has recalled that 'most critics' treated this revival 'forgivingly, as if it were a freaked-out *Salad Days* or a zonked *No, No Nanette*. *Hair* had become a period piece, a curio', despite Bogdanov's attempt to 'brash it up' with 'a denouement in which the shorn hippie, Claude, emerged from an acid trip to be mown down by the Vietcong and left splattered on a stage filled with roaming skeletons'. Director Daniel Kramer's 2005 revival at London's tiny Gate Theatre further updated the setting to the contemporaneous Iraq War. Now 'Claude, originally the victim of a policy that forced conscripts into the killing fields, had actually, if foolishly, volunteered for the Army, baffling his fellow druggies with this eagerness to "defend democracy"'. For Nightingale – who thus confirms the Warfield-Coveney thesis of the paramount importance of the score – 'it didn't work, but at least it reminded us that its catchy music hadn't been forgotten'.<sup>69</sup>

### **6.3 Coda: The 2007-10 Broadway and West End revival**

Only in 2007, forty years after its first production, did *Hair* once again begin to resonate with the theatrical imaginations of trans-Atlantic audiences. As American's post-war 'baby boomer' generation entered retirement age, the New York Public Theater, which had first staged the show in 1967, mounted a celebratory concert version in Central Park for three nights only, with 79 year-old Galt MacDermot directing the band from the keyboards. The popularity of these concerts encouraged the Public Theater to mount a full production for a limited

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<sup>67</sup> Cited in *The Independent*, 27/03/2010.

<sup>68</sup> *The Times*, 29/03/2010.

<sup>69</sup> 'The ageing of Aquarius', *The Times*, 29/03/2010.

run from July 2008 in its Delacorte Theater in the Park. That run was extended twice to September. Then, despite a profound global economic downturn – and to the delight of a new generation of pun-loving headline writers – *Hair* returned to Broadway, opening at the Al Hirschfeld Theater on 31 March 2009.<sup>70</sup>

Oskar Eustis, artistic director of the Public Theater, was ‘thrilled’ to be bringing the show which contained what he ‘laughingly’ described ‘as “the most famous nude scene in Anglo-American theatre”’ back to Broadway. He found it ““unbelievable”” that ““people still talk about”” the nude scene, pointing out that ““it only lasts for 30 seconds, and it was much more dimly lit back then””. He also stressed, however, in a manner which closely resembles Timothy Harward’s Reader’s Report for the Lord Chamberlain in 1968, that while the new production, directed by Diane Paulus, was ““very sexy ... there is nothing remotely salacious about it””. He added that none of the cast was obliged to strip, nor were bonuses being paid to those who did so.<sup>71</sup>

James Rado, also now in his seventies, was content that the new production remained faithful to the setting and the spirit of the original. Acknowledging that the ‘shocking’, ‘new’ and ‘very revolutionary’ impact of 1967 could not be replicated in the twenty-first century, Rado nonetheless believed that ‘the ecstatic ... way the tribe exists is something to be shared now; you are there, experiencing what it was like to be there for these people. There was no drug known as Ecstasy in those days, but there was an ecstasy in the movement’. That communal ecstasy had, he believed, been re-captured forty years on.

London’s critics and audiences would concur when the production transferred in its entirety to the Gielgud Theater – the former home of *Godspell* producers H.M. Tennent Ltd. – on 14 April 2010 for a limited run until 4 September. Sir Cameron Mackintosh, leading theatrical impresario and owner, through Delfont Mackintosh Theatres, of the Gielgud and six other major West End venues, had initially

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<sup>70</sup> ‘Hair today: anti-war show is back in style as it returns to Broadway’, *The Herald*, 12/09/2008; ‘Hippie replacement – Hair returns to London’s West End’, *The Independent*, 27/03/2010.

<sup>71</sup> *The Independent*, 27/03/2010.



declined to produce on the London stage the show in which he had begun his stage-management career at the Shaftesbury and then the Glasgow Metropole.<sup>72</sup> The success of the Broadway run had convinced him otherwise, resulting in ‘the first occasion that a full original Broadway cast, in this case of 26 people’ had transferred to a West End stage.<sup>73</sup>

Many of those reviewing the 2010 London production were themselves ‘baby boomers’ who had experienced ‘the freshness of the moment when *Hair* first hit a London that had just binned the theatrical censor’. Benedict Nightingale of *The Times* found the experience of the new production more reminiscent of 1968 than 1974, declaring it to be ‘exhilarating, as well as oddly poignant’.<sup>74</sup> *The Guardian*’s Michael Billington was pleased that the new production did not ‘attempt to update’ but, instead, recaptured ‘the carnivalesque optimism of the 60s’. This was achieved partly by the ‘touchy-feely actors’ who were as intent as their 1968 predecessors on ‘breaking down the barrier between stage and auditorium’, and by Paulus’ creation, ‘without attempting to emulate the pyrotechnic, strobe-lit dazzle of Tom O’Horgan’s original production’, of ‘a genuinely tribal show in which the spirit of the ensemble is greater than any individual’. Billington was willing to ‘confess’ that, for him, the show was ‘bathed in nostalgia’: it had become ‘part of all our yesterdays’ and he ‘wouldn’t deny for a moment that *Hair* is a period piece’. Nonetheless, what mattered for Billington was ‘that it celebrates a period when the joy of life was pitted against the forces of intolerance.’<sup>75</sup> Michael Coveney of *The Independent* lauded *Hair* as ‘the mother of all rock musicals’ and, ‘*sui generis*, one of the great musicals of all time’. It was, he was ‘relieved to discover’, a ‘phenomenon that ... stands up as a period piece with ... vitality and appeal’.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> *Hair* programme, Geilgud Theatre production, June 2010.

<sup>74</sup> *The Times*, 15/04/2010. Original London Claude Paul Nicholas noted with good humour the profound demographic shift marked by the show’s return to the West End when he revealed to interviewer Dominic Maxwell that ‘a couple of years ago I was trying to get the rights to do a 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary concert with the original [London] cast. When I was trying to think of a charity we could do it for, someone said: “Help the Aged”. I said: “Cheeky bastard”’. *The Times*, 29/03/2010.

<sup>75</sup> *The Guardian*, 14/04/2010.

<sup>76</sup> *The Independent*, 15/04/2010.

Charles Spencer of *The Daily Telegraph* was similarly enthused by the ‘timely and irresistibly vital revival of the greatest of all rock musicals’.<sup>77</sup>

The wheel of theatrical fashion appeared, therefore, to have come full circle: those who had responded with such enthusiasm to *Hair* at the time of its conception were joined in sufficient numbers by subsequent generations who wanted to at least investigate – and perhaps even ‘celebrate’ – its counter-cultural concerns. The loathing and anger directed towards *Hair* by the Counter-Culturalists of the late 1960s and early 1970s – which so often verged on simple envy at its ability to communicate to a mass audience – had, it appeared, been forgotten or was, in the twenty-first century, best ignored. This scenario replicated the balance of opinion in the immediate wake of the first Broadway and West End productions. Then, a plethora of theatre and music practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic were directly and immediately inspired by the ‘irresistibly vital’ model which *Hair* had established. As the next chapter will consider, in its immediate wake, and prior to the shows produced by *Hair*’s authors from 1971 onwards, a wave of self-proclaimed ‘Rock Musicals’ opened in New York and London which used as a template the new artistic prototype developed by Ragni, Rado and MacDermot.

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<sup>77</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 14/04/2010.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### The post-*Hair* wave and *Godspell*

#### 7.1 The post-*Hair* wave

While *Hair* was enjoying its first flush of critical and commercial success on both sides of the Atlantic, The Who laboured in the recording studio between September 1968 and March 1969 to produce *Tommy*. As will be addressed in Chapter Nine, *Tommy* was first released as an LP record in the UK in May 1969.

<sup>1</sup> Chapter Eleven will consider *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber similarly recorded over a five month period for release in the UK in October 1970.<sup>2</sup> *Godspell* was, however, the next of the Rock Operas under consideration in this thesis to be *staged* in the UK. In its form, and musical and visual style, *Godspell* was obviously indebted to *Hair*. It supplanted the messianic central analogy of *Hair* with a literal – and radical – re-examination of the life and teachings of Christ. The specifically religious reaction to *Godspell*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Hair* and *Tommy* will be addressed in Chapter Twelve. This chapter considers the origins of *Godspell* in the United States, its dramatic form and textual content, and its musical score. Chapter Eight addresses the production and reception of *Godspell*'s prompt transfer to London's West End.

First, however, this chapter considers some of the shows which were staged immediately after – and patently indebted to – *Hair*, but which did not achieve the same commercial success and have now been largely forgotten. Elizabeth Wollman has described the post-*Hair* wave of 'Rock Musicals' as mere '*Hair* imitations' which provoked many critics to display 'signs that their patience ... was rapidly wearing thin'. *Your Own Thing*, for example, with music and lyrics by Hal Hester and Danny Apolinar and a book by Donald Driver, was 'inspired' by Shakespeare and transplanted the separated-twins and gender-confusion plot of *Twelfth Night* into the contemporary world of the entertainment industries.<sup>3</sup> *Your*

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Charlesworth and Ed Hanel, *The Who: The Complete Guide to their Music* (London: Omnibus Press, 2004), p.34

<sup>2</sup> Tim Rice, *Oh, What A Circus: The Autobiography* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1999) p.218.

<sup>3</sup> 'Your Own Thing' Libretto © 1968 by Donald Lee Driver with lyrics by Hal Hester and Danny Apolinar, Richards (ed.), *Great Rock Musicals*, pp.289-378.

*Own Thing* opened at the Orpheum Theater, New York on 13 January 1968, ran for 933 performances and became the first Off-Broadway show to win the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Musical.<sup>4</sup> It used film and slide projections and taped sound effects; the authors' intention being to 'accompany the written word to form a mixed-media collage'.<sup>5</sup> Like *Hair*, *Your Own Thing* made many knowing references to political, pop-cultural and historical figures. It is hampered throughout, however, by stilted, self-consciously modish dialogue which must have strained to seem ground-breaking by the time the show opened at London's Comedy Theatre on 6 February 1969 for a run of just 42 performances.<sup>6</sup> References to 'lots of LSD, pot for you and me' are unconvincing, while the attempt to shoe-horn the Vietnam War into the plot is particularly gratuitous within the prevailing contextual air of what Irvine Wardle of *The Times* called 'antiseptic charm'.<sup>7</sup> Wardle praised some aspects of *Your Own Thing*. He considered it 'a very bright show, and a splendid example of how a small budget can be turned to advantage'. He noted that 'the cast bound on like football heroes. Apart from their rock music no company could be more remote from that of *Hair*'. This comparison was not, however 'without its negative side' as, 'highly disciplined, scrubbed pink, and bursting with wholesome energy, they come over like an advertisement for beach wear'.<sup>8</sup>

Above all, the song lyrics (like most of the dialogue) are doggerel which lacks the *bravura*, tongue-twisting rhymes of *Hair* or the more subtle and skillful internal rhymes of Tim Rice's libretto for *Jesus Christ Superstar*. The song 'The Now Generation' ('staged and choreographed in the style of modern rock dances', as the authors felt compelled to explain in the script) sums up the libretto under which, in Wardle's words, *Your Own Thing* 'sags instantly':

Danny:        *Got the latest gear,*  
Michael:     *Buttons up to here,*  
John:         *Ready to appear,*  
All:           *We can't look shoddy.*

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.291.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.297.

<sup>6</sup> *The Times*, 21/01/1969; [http://www.nodanw.com/shows\\_y/your\\_own\\_thing.htm](http://www.nodanw.com/shows_y/your_own_thing.htm) (accessed 27/09/2008).

<sup>7</sup> 'Your Own Thing' Libretto, Richards (ed.), *Great Rock Musicals*, pp.350,321; *The Times*, 07/02/1969.

<sup>8</sup> *The Times*, 07/02/1969.

Viola: *Let your hair down and shake out all your curls.  
What's the difference, the boys all look like girls.*

All: *Baby, you can take a bow, we are the now generation.*

*Many miniskirts, polka-dotted shirts,  
What's the harm to be dressed from Carnaby?*

Danny: *How we love to dance*

Michael: *In bell-bottomed pants.*

John: *We can take a chance,*

All: *We might get tangled.*

Viola: *With our clothes on you can't tell us apart.  
Just be careful you look before you start.*

All: *You could get surprised and how!  
We are the now generation.*<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, while a soundtrack album was released, the relentlessly upbeat score lacked variety.<sup>10</sup> According to Wollman, it invited unfavourable comparisons with the synthesis of mid-period Beatles music offered by US pop-group The Monkees.<sup>11</sup> An aspiring young English actor and pop singer called David Essex got his first theatre job as an understudy in the Comedy Theatre production. The show closed, however, 'before the English cast were due to take over', leaving Essex in a minority who viewed the rapid demise of the London production of *Your Own Thing* 'sadly'.<sup>12</sup>

*Salvation* by Peter Link and C.C. Courtney, a revue-style fragmented musical which 'pitted the social mores of the counterculture against those of older generations', opened Off-Broadway in the late summer of 1969. *Stomp*, a 'plotless show, more performance art than musical theatre', opened in November 1969 in *Hair*'s first home, Joseph Papp's Public Theater. 'Billed as a "multimedia

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.; 'Your Own Thing' Libretto, Richards (ed.), *Great Rock Musicals*, pp.347-350.

<sup>10</sup> Original Cast Recording, *Your Own Thing*, LP RCA-Victor LSO 1148 (USA) and RCA-Victor SF 7972 (UK), 1968. Also in 1968, RCA-Victor released the original Broadway cast recording of *Hair*, having released the Off-off-Broadway version in 1967.

<sup>11</sup> Wollman, *The Theater*, pp.59-60, 62. *The Monkees* was a widely-exported American television series produced by the National Broadcasting Company between 1966 and 1968. It cast four actor/musicians as the eponymous (fictional) pop group and drew heavily on the visual tropes and slang dialogue of Richard Lester's Beatles films *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965). Life imitated art, however, when The Monkees succeeded in establishing themselves as a real - if unashamedly 'bubblegum' - pop act. They then, boldly, went on to challenge their manufactured pop personas in the overtly psychedelic film *Head* (Bob Rafelson, 1968). Their singles and albums achieved brief but spectacular success on both sides of the Atlantic; making The Monkees, in the opinion of the 19<sup>th</sup> edition of *The Guinness Book of British Hit Singles and Albums*, 'the world's top act of 1967'.

<sup>12</sup> David Essex, *A Charmed Life: The Autobiography of David Essex* (London: Orion, 2002), p.79.

protest rock musical”, *Stomp* was created by a group of University of Texas students working under the collective title of ‘the Combine. A great deal of publicity was generated by the fact that the Combine lived communally at the Public Theater in the weeks before and during the run of the show’. Like *Your Own Thing*, *Stomp* and *Salvation* garnered, at best, mixed critical responses.<sup>13</sup> Clive Barnes, an important early champion of *Hair*, strove to accentuate the positive in each. Even Barnes, however, struggled to find anything in *Salvation* worthy of praise. Despite being ‘a non-book’ show with ‘a popularized pop-rock score and a theme that doodles around young, almost-hippie people, with their sex, their drugs, and their longing to be touched’, *Salvation* invited comparison with *Hair* only to ‘emerge from that comparison ... a clear second best’.<sup>14</sup>

Likewise, *Stomp* provoked New York critic John Lahr to state that ‘protest is much more dangerous and complicated than holding placards which read “Fuck the Establishment.” *Stomp*’s’ homespun earnestness never convinces us of its liberation’. A staunch supporter of the ‘Rock Musical’ genre, Lahr nonetheless warned, of *Stomp*, that ‘formula imitations will bring a quick death for an explosive new dimension on the musical stage’.<sup>15</sup>

Such lukewarm critical responses did not, however, dampen British appetites for new rock musicals from America. Indeed, *Stomp* played at the Edinburgh Festival in August-September 1970 before running from 15 to 21 September 1970 at the National Theatre’s brand new ‘experimental’ space, The Young Vic, within less than a month of the venue’s opening.<sup>16</sup> *The Times*’ music critic, William Mann, had, on viewing *Stomp* at the Holland Festival *en route* to Britain, explained that

the story-line, not always easy to follow, is about a hero, Billy, who is born, raised, turns against his parents, runs away from home and, I understood vaguely, gets killed in a revolution. But Billy is conveniently forgotten somewhere before this, not having special relevance to the important topics the collective authors need to get into the show ... The cast run about the acting area indefatigably and are frequently moved to take off all their clothes. This, I gather, is not to happen in sober Caledonia.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Wollman, *The Theater*, pp.61-63.

<sup>14</sup> *New York Times*, 25/09/1969, cited in *Ibid.*, p.62.

<sup>15</sup> *Village Voice*, 20/11/1969 and 02/11/1969, cited in *Ibid.*, pp.63, 61.

<sup>16</sup> *The Times*, 15/07/1970; *The Times*, 12/08/1970. The National Theatre was, in 1970, based in the nearby Old Vic Theatre.

<sup>17</sup> *The Times*, 15/07/1970.

Michael Billington confirmed that the *Stomp* cast was indeed 'prevailed on not to strip' during their run at Edinburgh's Haymarket Ice Rink. Billington was of the opinion that, while 'it still counts as something of a breakthrough for this multi-media rock musical to be staged as part of the official festival ... this may be an indication of just how safe and respectable the show's gestures of nonconformist protest have become'. The trade paper of Britain's theatre community, *The Stage*, viewed *Stomp*'s inclusion within the programme of the 'official' Edinburgh Festival – rather than its avowedly more 'alternative' Festival Fringe – more positively. *The Stage* suggested that 'it shows that the organizers are aware of the necessity of providing youth with an entertainment of their own', and concluded that 'this is a healthy trend, being the first real counter-blast to the Fringe'.<sup>18</sup> Billington, in contrast, while expressing admiration for 'the verve and skill of Douglas Dyer's production', seemed wearied by 'a physically exuberant but intellectually naïve piece of instant protest' which 'inevitably introduces Vietnam as the major explanation for the young's sense of alienation'.<sup>19</sup>

There were, however, home-grown, English equivalents of these less successful, long-forgotten but intriguing post-*Hair* shows. One such was *Catch My Soul*, a rock-musical interpretation of Shakespeare's *Othello* with book and lyrics by Jack Good.<sup>20</sup> Starring singers P.J. Proby, P.P. Arnold and Lance LeGault alongside (white) Good as the Moor, it opened at Manchester University Theatre in October 1970 before touring to Birmingham and Oxford.<sup>21</sup> Ray Northrop of *New Musical Express* declared the show 'an absolute knockout' and was particularly impressed by the music 'provided by a terrific group known as The Grass'. 'The only weakness in this musical', he felt, was 'the story line and I am afraid that here the production does tend to suffer to some considerable degree'. Nonetheless, Northrop believed that the 'production could, if properly managed, become as big

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<sup>18</sup> *The Stage and Television Today*, 27/08/1970.

<sup>19</sup> *The Times*, 03/08/1971; 31/08/1970.

<sup>20</sup> Pioneering pop impresario Good had produced and directed the first two pop-music series on British television in the earliest days of rock and roll: *Six-Five Special* for the BBC in 1957 and *Oh Boy!* for ITV in 1958. Regular *Oh Boy!* guests such as Cliff Richard, Marty Wilde and Billy Fury were (as Richard and Wilde acknowledged in *The Guardian* on 26/09/2008) indebted to Good for his early promotion of them as Britain's answers to Elvis Presley.

<sup>21</sup> *Record Mirror*, 24 October 1970; <http://pjproby.blogspot.com/2008/01/life-and-career-of-great-pj-proby.html> (accessed 15 July 2008).

as “Hair”<sup>22</sup>. An album, made by Polydor Records (who had released the London cast recording of *Hair*), was subsequently ‘highly recommended’ by *The Times*.<sup>23</sup> *Catch My Soul* then became the first rock musical to play at the Round House in North London, where it opened on the 21 December 1970.<sup>24</sup> Although *The Times*’ John Higgins found ‘the musical style ... old fashioned’, he concluded that a ‘good score, smart staging, attacking singing, verve and enthusiasm all add up to a considerable success ... [which] looks set for a substantial run at the Round House and probably elsewhere’.<sup>25</sup> *Catch My Soul* did indeed have its Round House run extended to 13 February 1971 (from a proposed closure date of 16 January). It transferred to the Prince of Wales Theatre in the West End, where it played between 17 February and 24 July 1971.<sup>26</sup> Jack Good then produced a movie version in 1973, directed by actor Patrick McGoohan and starring Richie Havens as the Moor. *The Times*, however, considered the film of *Catch My Soul* to be an ‘ill-judged venture’ which made ‘no kind of sense or impact, and resembles the film of *Jesus Christ Superstar* with a busload of hippies performing Shakespeare in New Mexico instead of a Passion play in Israel’.<sup>27</sup>

The post-*Hair* wave also swept over English drama students, and those responsible for their training. At the end of 1971, a classified advert in *Time Out* magazine (then very much a part of London’s ‘underground’ or ‘alternative’ press) publicized another ‘New Rock Musical’ entitled *Ears*. This audacious ‘Legend for the 70’s’, ‘devised and directed by Gunduz Kalic and E. 15.’ was presented by students of East 15 acting school at their Corbett Theatre in Loughton, Essex, between 27 December 1971 and 15 January 1972.<sup>28</sup> *The Stage* reported that the students had given up their Christmas holidays to present the piece, in which ‘the atmosphere of a pop concert is combined with realistic acting and dialogue’, with

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<sup>22</sup> *New Musical Express*, week ending 31/10/1970.

<sup>23</sup> *Catch my Soul: Live Original Cast Recording*, Polydor Records 2383-05, 1970, <http://www.castalbumdb.com/Rec.cfm?RNumber=2187> (accessed 15/07/2008); *The Times*, 23/12/1970.

<sup>24</sup> Jinnie Schiele, *Off-centre Stages: Fringe Theatre at the Open Space and the Round House 1968-1983* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press/Society for Theatre Research, 2005), pp.175, 218; <http://www.roundhouse.org.uk/assets/wysiwyg/docs/press/2HistoryoftheRoundhouse.pdf> (accessed 15/07/2008).

<sup>25</sup> *The Times*, 23/12/1970.

<sup>26</sup> *The Times*, 08/01/1971; *The Stage and Television Today*, 28/01/1971; 08/07/1971.

<sup>27</sup> *The Times*, 16/11/1973.

<sup>28</sup> *Time Out*, No.97, 24-30/12/1971, p.46.



'twenty songs composed by the cast played by a group on stage'.<sup>29</sup> *The Stage's* somewhat bemused reviewer, 'M.M.', recounting that East 15 had 'joined the trend – let's make a rock opera', would admit that 'I don't pretend to be an expert on the species, but most of "Ears" seemed pleasantly unstoney to me'.<sup>30</sup> In re-interpreting the myth of King Midas, *Ears* pitted the pop music of a Cliff Richard-style Apollo against the rock music of a Mick Jagger-inspired Pan. Pan/Jagger, triumphant in a public musical competition, bestows upon Midas the gift of turning all he touches to gold. The defeated Apollo/Richard, however, curses the King with donkey's ears. After his kingdom experiences a year-long debate over its sudden wealth and commercialism (and a media whispering campaign about what the King could be hiding under his swiftly-adopted hat), Midas ultimately learns to love his *Ears*.<sup>31</sup>

While Kalic rehearsed his students in such roles as 'Mrs Midas' and 'Zeus', the cast of *Godspell* prepared for their British premiere. *Godspell* would prove that critical responses which were at best mixed need not hinder the rapid development of a small-scale, intimate pop-rock musical into another world-wide success to rival that of the more spectacular *Hair*. The 'underground' press, in contrast to the treatment meted out to the other three Rock Opera case studies of this thesis, chose, with the exception of one review in *Time Out*, to ignore *Godspell* completely. The two events which incited John-Michael Tebelak to write *Godspell* resonate, however, with two key concerns of the Counter-Culturalists: he sought (and failed to find) spiritual enlightenment within mainstream religion, and he was frisked for drugs (fruitlessly) by the police.

## **7.2 *Godspell*: the 'clean' *Hair*? – origins and text**

Asked in several press interviews to explain the genesis of *Godspell*, John-Michael Tebelak recounted that, during Easter 1970, he was working, unproductively, on his Master's thesis for the School of Drama of Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Dejected, Tebelak, a converted Jew,

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<sup>29</sup> *The Stage and Television Today*, 30/12/1971.

<sup>30</sup> *The Stage and Television Today*, 13/01/1972.

<sup>31</sup> Gunduz Kalic, email to the author, 02/05/2008.

decided to attend the Anglican Easter Vigil Service at the city's snow-covered St. Paul's Cathedral; ostensibly

the proper setting for a religious experience. But the people in the church seemed bored, and the clergymen seemed to be hurrying to get it over with. I left with the feeling that, rather than rolling the rock away from the Tomb, they were piling more on. I went home, took out my manuscript, and worked it to completion in a non-stop frenzy.<sup>32</sup>

In some versions of this account, however, (including that chosen for publicity purposes by the show's West End producers), on

leaving the nave of the church, long-haired John-Michael was stopped and searched for drugs by a policeman. Shortly thereafter, the concept of the play accelerated; it all came together for him in what he now considers the most crucial week of his life, a week of great personal crisis.<sup>33</sup>

The first, student production of *Godspell*, featuring a cast of five men and five women – but very little music – was well-received by Tebelak's university. Aware of Ellen Stewart and Café LaMama's reputation for nurturing new drama – not least *Hair* – the confident twenty-two year old apparently 'paid a call on the first lady of the American avant-garde theatre' who 'said "yes" to the dungaree-clad youth and told him to bring his fellow students to New York for a February 24 world premiere of a work-in-progress entitled GODSPELL'. Producers Edgar Lansbury, Stuart Duncan and Joseph Beruh promptly spotted considerable potential in the piece – if the musical elements could be overhauled and greatly expanded.<sup>34</sup> They introduced Tebelak to fledgling composer and lyricist Stephen Schwartz. Like Tebelak, Schwartz was a young Carnegie Mellon student. Neither, however, was aware that the other was, simultaneously, attempting to make inroads into the theatrical and musical life of New York. The heavily-revised Tebelak-Schwartz version of *Godspell* opened at a long-established off-Broadway venue, the Cherry Lane Theater, on 17 May 1971.<sup>35</sup> As would prove to be the case in London, while many New York theatre critics considered the show to be

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<sup>32</sup> Joseph Barton, S.J., 'The Godspell Story', *America – The National Catholic Weekly*, 12/12/1971 (accessed through <http://www.godspellpage.com/>, 30/11/2007).

<sup>33</sup> *Godspell Around the World*, London production souvenir programme, undated, c.1972, Theatre Collection, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, THM/271.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. Edgar Lansbury is the brother of the London-born stage and screen actress Angela Lansbury. They are grandchildren of George Lansbury, leader of the Labour Party between 1932 and 1935.

<sup>35</sup> *Godspell Around the World*, V & A.

what Wollman has summarized as ‘too syrupy for their tastes’, the show was an immediate hit with audiences.<sup>36</sup> It transferred to the Promenade Theater in August 1971 then the Broadhurst Theater, on Broadway proper, in June 1976. After short further spells at the Plymouth and Ambassador Theatres, *Godspell*'s run in New York finally ended in September 1977.<sup>37</sup>

The text of *Godspell* swings freely between near-*verbatim* passages of Saint Matthew's Gospel (with some interpolations from Luke and John) and demotic, contemporary speech. These playful anachronistic clashes occur throughout the piece. The tone of the dialogue – and of the frequent, often over-detailed, italicized stage directions included in the published script – is established in the initial exchange between John the Baptist and Jesus. After a Prologue, which signifies the confusion and desperation of those awaiting salvation, John the Baptist sounds a shofar.<sup>38</sup> Singing as he enters through the auditorium, John calls upon the godless, both on stage and in the audience, to ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord’. The other eight characters (not including Jesus) ‘*erupt into cheers and leaps of joy*’, with ‘*each coming forward in turn to be baptized in an individual and amusing way*’ from ‘*a plastic bucket with a wet sponge inside it*’. John then delivers a confrontational sermon to the – by implication unbaptized – audience:

You vipers' brood! Who warned you to escape the coming retribution?  
Then prove your repentance by the fruit it bears; and do not presume to  
say to yourselves ‘We have Abraham for our father.’ I tell you that God can  
make children for Abraham out of these stones here...I baptize you with  
water, for repentance' sake, but He who comes after me is mightier than I  
am. I am not fit to take off his shoes! He will baptize you with the Holy  
Spirit and with fire!

John is ‘*instantly abashed*’ on seeing Jesus ‘*standing there, holding out the baptismal bucket*’.

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<sup>36</sup> Wollman, *The Theater*, p.88.

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.musicalschwartz.com/godspell-broadway.htm> (accessed 15/07/2008).

<sup>38</sup> The dialogue of the ‘Tower of Babel’ Prologue has often been excised in later productions. As in David Greene’s 1973 film, it has sometimes been replaced by a scenario or tableau which conveys the mundane, godless lives of contemporary individuals who then respond to the call of John the Baptist. The beginning of the published Prologue, however, implies similarities with *Hair*’s ‘Aquarius’ opening: the cast are instructed to form ‘a tight circle’ and ‘begin a low humming, almost like a Zen “Omm” sound’, which ‘suggests the music of the spheres’. *Godspell* Libretto and Principal-Chorus Vocal Book, Conceived and Directed by John-Michael Tebelak, Music and New Lyrics by Stephen Schwartz (Plymouth: Latimer Trend & Company), © 1971, pp.1-4. Permission to cite *Godspell* in this thesis was granted by the UK copyright agents Samuel French Ltd., 52 Fitzroy Street, London W1P 6JR.

John: (*to Jesus, with wonder*) Do you come to me?

Jesus: Yeah, I wanna get washed up.

John: (*Kneeling reverently before Jesus*) I need rather to be baptized by you.

Jesus: (*gently bringing John back to his feet*) No, no. Look, let it be so for the present; we do well to conform with all that God requires.

John baptizes Jesus '*by giving him a light sponge bath. Jesus, clad only in his bright boxer shorts, seems to have the freshness and simplicity of one newborn*' as he sings his opening number 'Save The People':

When wilt thou save the people?  
O God of mercy, when?  
The people, Lord, the people  
Not thrones and crowns, but men! ...  
God save the people!<sup>39</sup>

The overall objective of *Godspell* is, subsequently, to convey, through a succession of well-known Parables punctuated by musical numbers, '*the formation of a community*' within a single stage setting of a sparse, urban public playground surrounded by wire fencing.<sup>40</sup> Immediately after their collective baptism, the cast change clothes into '*brightly-coloured mufti*'. All ten also apply face-paint or adopt '*some sort of symbol that shows that they have separated themselves from society and that they are members of a tribe*'. John is henceforth referred to in the script as Judas '*for convenience*', because '*in Godspell the characters of John and Judas are combined into one role, that of Jesus' right-hand man who ultimately betrays him*'.<sup>41</sup> Jesus then plays games with his new followers in order to illustrate the moral message of each of the Parables, which are presented in sketch-like succession. The other eight cast members use their own names when not stepping in and out of the many comic characters (or, more often, caricatures) which the script demands of them *en route* through the familiar Biblical stories. Slapstick and physical comedy, parodies of well-known comedians (including Groucho Marx), comic voices and 'funny walks' ensue in rapid succession. Immediately prior to the recitation of the Beatitudes, for

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<sup>39</sup> *Godspell* Script, pp.3-6. Both Libretto (script) and musical score are combined in one published volume available from Samuel French Ltd. Subsequent footnotes refer, however, to page numbers in either the *Godspell* Script or *Godspell* Score.

<sup>40</sup> *Godspell* Script, p.1.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

example, Jesus, while inviting the rest of the cast to ‘consider the lilies of the field’, ‘magically ... makes pop flowers appear. The others react with the same astonishment with which they greet all his cheap magic tricks.’<sup>42</sup> Mime (signified in the script by the US English term ‘pantomime’) is prominent throughout the show. The description of Noah’s Ark, therefore, requires that the cast promptly ‘become animals’ who mime ‘sailing movements’ before enacting ‘drowning’ and ‘whirling around in the waters’.<sup>43</sup> When, later in Act II, Jesus warns that the Son of Man will divide ‘men into two groups as a shepherd separates the sheep – maa! ... from the goats – baa!’, the convention is well-established: the *Godspell* audience expects, and duly gets, ovine and caprine imitations from the rest of the cast.<sup>44</sup>

The resulting high-energy *melange* combines, therefore, well-known techniques appropriated from American radio comedy of the 1930s to 1950s and Vaudeville theatre with tropes familiar from British Music-Hall and Variety theatre, ‘end-of-pier’ comedy and Pantomime. Tebelak was honest in his assessment that, because ‘the script he finally completed was principally an adaptation of the gospel, and the lyrics of the songs were old hymns’, he “‘really did not write much at all”. But he added the show’s dynamic presentation, which’, to both admirers and detractors of *Godspell*, ‘is probably its most memorable feature’. Tebelak was particularly pleased, in 1972, to follow ‘another pantomime-influenced show, Joan Littlewood’s *Oh, What A Lovely War!*’ into London’s Wyndham’s Theatre. He acknowledged in *The Times* that Littlewood’s play, which closed at Wyndham’s nearly ten years before Tebelak’s opened, ‘played an important part in the origins of his show. “I find Littlewood’s work fantastic”, he said. “I think she has influenced me a great deal. We both seem to like larger-than-life theatre”’.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp.23-24.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.41.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp.44-45.

<sup>45</sup> Geoffrey Wansell, profile of John-Michael Tebelak, *The Times*, 02/02/1972. The US English term ‘pantomime’ – ‘mime’ in UK English – is common throughout the script as an instruction to the actors. *Godspell* also, however, draws frequently upon many of the twentieth-century performance techniques and conventions of the distinctively British, post-Restoration, Christmas-time theatrical form of Pantomime. Although little known in the USA, Tebelak seems to have been well aware that, not least in its use of direct address to the audience, playfully physical ‘broad’ (or ‘low’) comedy, and deliberately non-realistic, ‘coarse’ or “‘larger-than-life”” acting, *Godspell* was heavily indebted to the British Pantomime tradition.

The first half of *Godspell* concludes with a 'larger-than-life' act of audience inclusion worthy of *Hair*'s director Tom O'Horgan. The song 'Light of the World' ends Act I with the refrain

So let your light so shine before men ...  
So that they might know some kindness again  
We all need help to feel fine  
Let's have some wine!

In an echo – and development – of the post-London invitation to *Hair* audiences to join the performers onstage after the show's finale, Tebelak's Jesus invites his audience to join the *Godspell* actors 'for a little wine' during the interval. Some of the cast '*remain onstage to give out wine to the audience as the band continues to jam for a while*'.<sup>46</sup> This 'wine break' was an audacious theatrical gesture; unprecedented for either Broadway or London's West End. Moreover, it cleverly acknowledges and combines both aspects – the sacred and the profane – of the 'communality' which *Godspell* strives to engender and portray throughout. '*The formation of a community*' – within a contemporary, ostensibly secularized setting – is equated with, and deemed inseparable from, the sacramental act of 'communion' with God as symbolized by the consumption of wine. In addition to his eclectic borrowings from American Vaudeville and British Pantomime, therefore, Tebelak also, as Robert Ellis noted perceptively at the time, mines a more ancient seam of theatrical tradition. Through its conflation of sacred subject matter with an encouragement of festivity and physical abandon, *Godspell* frequently suggests – not least through the hint of bacchanalia gently implied by the interval 'wine break' – that 'the appeal of the medieval mystery plays has come to life again'.<sup>47</sup>

Act II continues the established sequence of playful Parables before shifting towards a more linear (if heavily condensed) account of the Passion, including the Last Supper. The narrative climax of the play proper begins when Judas '*rolls up his sleeves like a magician, revealing a red ribbon tied to each of his wrists*'. He then '*grabs Jesus under the arms and begins to drag him back towards the fence*'

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<sup>46</sup> *Godspell* Script, pp.47-51.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Ellis, "'Godspell' as Medieval Drama", *America – The National Catholic Weekly*, 23/12/1972 (accessed through <http://www.godspellpage.com/> on 30/10/2007).

which encloses the upstage area of the play-park stage setting. Judas stands Jesus on a crate, then '*takes the red ribbons and ties Jesus's outstretched arms to the fence.*' While the rest of the cast are rendered helpless, horrified observers, the physical agony of crucifixion is portrayed through Stephen Schwartz's powerful scoring for rock band.<sup>48</sup>

Notably, neither *Godspell* nor *Jesus Christ Superstar* portrays the Resurrection. Rather, the main narrative of both pieces concludes with reverent, and theatrically effective, portrayals of the Crucifixion. For Tebelak and Schwartz, the overarching objective of *Godspell* is to address '*the effect Jesus has on others*'. This '*is the story of the show, not whether or not he himself is resurrected*'. Nonetheless, *Godspell* ends on a celebratory note. The cast (now, in effect, Jesus' disciples), take their master down while singing the repeated line 'Long live God'. They carry off '*the horizontal form of Jesus triumphantly in the air*' as the score segues into a defiant reprise of John's initial, repeated one-line mantra 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord', followed by a final, 'singalong', curtain-call reprise of the show's biggest hit song, 'Day by Day'. The authors intended that this '*very important*' conclusion should convey '*that the others have come through the violence and pain of the crucifixion sequence and leave with a joyful determination to carry on the ideas and feelings they have learned during the course of the show*'.<sup>49</sup> *Godspell* ends, therefore, with a metaphorical, if not literal, resurrection; in which all – including the audience – can partake in a spirit of both '*community*' and '*communion*'.<sup>50</sup>

As Chapter Twelve will address, the most controversial aspect of *Godspell* was its physical embodiment of Christ on stage: a historic first for London's West End. The specific nature of that embodiment was all the more audacious because, only three years after the 1968 Theatres Act – and only four years after the Lord Chamberlain last refused a License to a play on religious grounds – *Godspell* presented on the London stage, and those of all major cities in the West, a Jesus

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<sup>48</sup> *Godspell* Script, pp.51-52; *Godspell* Score pp.58-59.

<sup>49</sup> *Godspell* Script, p.52; *Godspell* Score pp.59-61.

<sup>50</sup> Notably, one of the many reasons for which Charles Marowitz had praised *Hair* was its ability to generate 'a genuinely tribal sense of communion'. *Plays and Players*, Vol. 16 No.2, November 1968.

who was 'part hippie and part ragged clown'.<sup>51</sup> Wollman is correct in her assertion that the *Godspell* Jesus, a recognisably contemporary young man, albeit one bedecked in clownish face-paint as well as T-shirt and dungarees, was 'in keeping with' at least some aspects of 'the Christian revivalism' of the early 1970s.<sup>52</sup> He was also, however, physically recognisable to those who considered the 'counter-culture' to be, predominantly, a quest for non-religious or pantheistic 'spiritual enlightenment'. Moreover, Robert Ellis, struck by the Old English origins of the title *Godspell*, noted that 'both medieval and modern playwrights' used remarkably 'similar techniques for bringing their subject matter close to us'. These techniques included the encouragement to performers both to 'garnish their venerable texts with their own rough and ready idiom' and 'to dress in contemporary garb' (both of which are also features of *Jesus Christ Superstar*). Indeed, Ellis invoked yet another theatrical precedent, asking: 'can it be mere coincidence that the popular Elizabethan stage arose almost immediately upon the termination of the mysteries? Both possessed the intimacy between entertainer and entertained that afterwards largely disappeared from the English-speaking theater until the 20th century's experimental inclinations' – as expressed most vividly in the commercial theatre by *Hair* – 'prepared the way for a show like *Godspell*'.<sup>53</sup>

Therefore, as Geoffrey Wansell concluded in *The Times*, it was Tebelak's 'synthesis of the traditional' conveyed by a 'youthful cast' and his anachronistic textual conflation of well-known Biblical (and quasi- or pseudo-Biblical) passages with contemporary 'street' argot that constituted 'a large part of *Godspell's* appeal'.<sup>54</sup> The show's producers strove, through astute marketing, to maintain both halves of Tebelak's appealing Biblical-Hippie equation. Cleverly, their Jesus was, boldly, 'a revolutionary'; but not someone who shouted the slogans or profane language of *Hair*. *Godspell's* producers, rather, asked of their audiences: 'Did ever a revolutionary speak so quietly?'<sup>55</sup> Scott Warfield is therefore correct in

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<sup>51</sup> Shellard and Nicholson with Handley, *Lord Chamberlain Regrets...* p.181; Wollman, *The Theater*, p.87.

<sup>52</sup> Wollman, *The Theater*, pp.87.

<sup>53</sup> Ellis, "'Godspell'", *America*, 23/12/1972.

<sup>54</sup> *The Times*, 02/02/1972.

<sup>55</sup> *Godspell Around the World*, V & A.



identifying that *Godspell* 'appealed to adults who might not have cared for the more realistic and scruffy hippies of *Hair*'.<sup>56</sup>

### 7.3 Musical score

While the theatrical form and text of *Godspell* made it more palatable than *Hair* for a general audience, the dynamic and stylistic range of Stephen Schwartz's *Godspell* score – wider than that of Galt MacDermot's for *Hair* – makes it worthy of particular scrutiny. The songs in *Godspell* are, generally, up-beat, celebratory pop-rock showtunes of a standard length around, on average, three minutes. Written three years after *Hair*, the music occasionally betrays the influence of the 'folk-rock' wave of newly-popular US singer-songwriters (specifically of the 'Laurel Canyon' variety). The brass section of the *Hair* band is dispensed with. Schwartz, instead, scores for just four players: piano/organ; electric/acoustic guitar (and occasional banjo); bass guitar and drum kit. He is, however, inventive in wringing every musical possibility out of his four-piece band and cast of ten; 'All Good Gifts', for example, features a recorder solo played by one of the cast.<sup>57</sup>

The gleeful anachronistic clashes of Tebelak's script are matched by Schwartz's setting of the words of ancient hymns, some of which are familiar to Christian church-goers, to new music. While the passages he wrote (or adapted) earned him a credit for 'New Lyrics by Stephen Schwartz', several of the most inventive and effective songs in the show marry Schwartz's new music to existing, *verbatim* texts which can be dated as far back as the thirteenth century. 'All Good Gifts', for example is a new musical setting of the popular hymn 'We Plough the Fields and Scatter': written in German by Matthias Claudius of Hamburg in 1782, it was first translated into English and published in the 1868 Appendix to *Hymns Ancient and Modern*.<sup>58</sup> The show's biggest hit song, 'Day by Day', is Schwartz's setting of a six-line poem by Richard of Chichester (1197-1253).<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Warfield, 'From *Hair*', *Cambridge Companion*, p.237.

<sup>57</sup> *Godspell* Score, p.36.

<sup>58</sup> *Claves Regni: the online magazine of St Peter's Church, Nottingham*, <http://www.stpetersnottingham.org/hymns/plough.htm>, (accessed 04/04/2007).

<sup>59</sup> *Oremus*, online index of Hymnals, <http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/d/d011.html>, (accessed 04/04/2007).

There are some skillful, if rather blatant, pastiches of well-established musical genres. 'We Beseech Thee' is in the style of a brisk duple-time 'hoe down' or 'square dance' of the American south. It features '18 Bars of mouth percussion', including an 'Imitation of a Kazoo' and 'of a Jews Harp (lips vibrating)'.<sup>60</sup> 'All for the Best' is a duet in 'Soft-Shoe tempo' for Jesus and Judas. They sing in counterpoint, dance – complete with canes, whose 'magical' appearance is accompanied by rim-shots from the drummer – and, in the middle of the song, deliver interpolated dialogue over a musical vamp '*in the style of vaudeville patter*':

Jesus: ... how can you take the speck of sawdust out of your brother's eye, when all the time there's this great plank in you own?

Judas: I don't know. How can you take the speck of sawdust out of your brother's eye when all the time there's this great plank in you own?

Jesus: You hypocrite!

*The music stops*

*(Turning to Judas)* First take the plank out of your own eye so you can see clearly to take the speck of sawdust out of your brother's.

*One of the others blows a blast on a Hollywood hooter, as if this were a hilarious vaudeville punchline ... The music gets very fast, like silent movie accompaniment, and the others ... all join ... for final verse of song ... They dance in herky-jerky movements as if in a silent movie.*<sup>61</sup>

Act II opens with Schwartz's adaptation of another long-established hymn, 'Turn Back, O Man', into 'a number reminiscent of the cheerful lustiness of Mae West'.<sup>62</sup> One of the female cast members is given the opportunity to become 'a temptress in the best smoky saloon tradition' and 'slink off the stage and up the aisle seducing men – for the Lord, of course'<sup>63</sup> Schwartz and Tebelak encourage her to address specific audience members with *ad libs* such as '*Hiya, big boy*' and '*What you doing after the show, honey?*'<sup>64</sup> The whole company (minus Jesus) concludes the number in a '*cake walk*' or kick-line.<sup>65</sup>

In addition, however, to these pastiche numbers, Tebelak's eclectic combination of theatrical and verbal styles old and new is matched by Schwartz's skillful

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<sup>60</sup> *Godspell* Score, pp.52-53.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-35; *Godspell* Script, pp.25-27.

<sup>62</sup> Barton, 'The Godspell Story', *America*, 12/12/1971.

<sup>63</sup> Ellis, "'Godspell'", *America*, 23/12/1972.

<sup>64</sup> *Godspell* Score, pp.42-34.

<sup>65</sup> *Godspell* Script, p.37.

appropriation of several strands of then-current pop-rock music. 'Alas For You', Jesus' rebuke to the Pharisees, is the most aggressive number in the show; as is reflected in its shifts in time signature from 7/4 to 6/8, 5/8, 4/4 and 6/4 before settling into a fast 4/4.<sup>66</sup> The influence of black soul music is apparent in 'Light of the World'. Featuring prominent Hammond organ, this adaptation of the words of Matthew 5 begins with a rhythmically-delivered, spoken introduction for Jesus which would, in the twenty-first century, be classed as a Rap.<sup>67</sup>

The 'spiritually introspective lyric passages' of 'On the Willows' (sung as well as played by the musicians in the band while the cast bid their farewells to Jesus prior to the Crucifixion) and the opening of 'Save the People' (accompanied by acoustic guitar) betray Schwartz's stated 'admiration for singer-songwriters like Joni Mitchell, Laura Nyro, James Taylor, Paul Simon, and Cat Stevens'.<sup>68</sup> 'Day by Day', the most well-known song in the show, demonstrates best Schwartz's stylistic eclecticism. While the song consists of only six lines of lyrics and sixteen bars of melody which are repeated five times (with an extended coda), interest is maintained by the composer's increasingly skilful arrangement for his limited musical resources. 'Day by Day' begins, in a manner reminiscent of Joni Mitchell's early work, with a simple, lilting, 3/4 piano accompaniment rich in major and minor 7<sup>th</sup> chords which, along with the melody, meander far from the tonic key of F major.<sup>69</sup> The 'Easy waltz feel', languid triplets and 'smooth' or 'jazzy' 7<sup>th</sup> chords also suggest the influence of the American songwriter Burt Bacharach. The other women in the cast contribute ethereal backing vocals in the second verse. The tempo picks up at the start of verse three with a change in time signature to a steady 4/4. As the male voices enter, the vocal harmonies become increasingly contrapuntal and rich in extended chords in a manner reminiscent of the lush, multi-tracked vocal textures created in the recording studio by American

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<sup>66</sup> *Godspell* Score, pp.44-45.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.39-40.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58, p.15; Stephen Schwartz, 'personal communication, May 4 2000' in Wollman, *The Theater*, p.87. On Nyro, see 'The Artistry of Laura Nyro', Ian MacDonald, *The People's Music* (London: Pimlico, 2003) pp.127-134.

<sup>69</sup> See Joni Mitchell, *Ladies of the Canyon* (1970) and *Blue* (1971), Reprise Records RSLP 6376 and K 44128.

sibling duo The Carpenters.<sup>70</sup> Handclaps and vocal extemporisation from the lead female vocalist drive the song through an extended coda to its audacious conclusion on an E6<sup>th</sup> chord.<sup>71</sup>

'By my Side' is the only song in *Godspell* not composed by Schwartz. Original cast member Peggy Gordon wrote the music for the first student production, Jay Hamburger provided the lyrics and the song was subsequently retained. A ballad, initially for two female voices, its moments of tension and cathartic resolution of discords at intervals of major and minor 2nds are the most harmonically adventurous passages of the *Godspell* score. Although the song is addressed onstage to Jesus, the lyrics are not based in scripture or existing hymn texts and are non-specifically devotional. The accompaniment is predominantly acoustic throughout. The song expands into antiphonal, 'call-and-response' harmonies from the rest of the cast, concluding with the line 'By my Side' repeated as a round.<sup>72</sup> Notably, therefore, it utilizes many of the musical tropes common in the contemporaneous work of Judee Sill.<sup>73</sup>

The atmosphere of acoustic reverie established in 'By my Side' is replicated by Schwartz in the show's penultimate number, 'On The Willows'. This mood is then broken, however, by the score's one instrumental passage of *bona fide* 'hard' blues-rock; made all the more dramatically effective by being withheld until the moments of Christ's Crucifixion and death. More powerful and louder than any passage in *Hair* (other than the brief Doors-like electric guitar work which introduces 'Dead End'), the electric guitar solos of the Finale, as performed in the London cast recording by Lance Dowden, are of a volume and bluesy intensity

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<sup>70</sup> The Carpenters' first world-wide hit single was their 1970 recording of Burt Bacharach and Hal David's song '(They Long to Be) Close to You'.

<sup>71</sup> *Godspell* Score, pp.18-23.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.46-50.

<sup>73</sup> Singer-songwriter Judee Sill (1944-79) merits further investigation. Her pre-occupation (as stated in live performance) with 'romantic love and Holy love' reflects the counter-cultural quest for a redefined relationship between the individual and the religious or the spiritual. Sill completed two studio albums during her lifetime, *Judee Sill* (1971) and *Heart Food* (1973), Asylum SD-5050 and SD-5063. Reissued together in 2006 as *Abracadabra – The Asylum Years* (Asylum/Rhino UK CD 122 79532 2), both betray the musical influences of the sacred works of J.S. Bach and the style of piano and organ-playing associated with American Pentecostal churches. Sill's song 'The Donor' concludes with a setting of the liturgical phrase 'Kyrie eleison', and 'The Kiss' is a meditation on the 'sweet communion of a kiss'. Other songs abundant in quasi-ecclesiastical imagery include 'My Man on Love' and 'Jesus Was a Crossmaker'.

which would not have shamed British guitar virtuoso Eric Clapton. Dowden is supported by an explosive drumming passage from fellow *Godspell*-band member Don Lawson which, although brief, bears comparison with Keith Moon's prodigious work throughout *Tommy*.<sup>74</sup> This musical representation of Jesus' death is followed by the *pianissimo* repeated refrain 'Love live God'. This, in turn, crescendos into the musical 'Resurrection' conveyed through reprises of 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord' and 'Day by Day'.

Scott Warfield has noted that 'despite' its 'stylistic eclecticism, the score holds together well in the youthful celebration of spirituality that permeated *Godspell*'.<sup>75</sup> It is, however, because of rather than 'despite' its stylistic variety that Schwartz' score retains the interest of its audience while serving, skilfully, the dramatic objectives of Tebelak's script. As the next chapter considers, both script and score received mixed responses from London's theatre critics. Enthusiastic audience response and good business at the box-office would, however, ensure that *Godspell* in London would follow the example set by the New York production (and earlier that of *Hair*) and transfer from a 'fringe' venue – the favoured counter-cultural locale of the Round House – to the West End.

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<sup>74</sup> *Godspell London Cast Recording*, Bell Records BELLS 203, 1971; *Godspell Score*, pp.58-60. 'Dead End' was released on the 1970 LP *Fresh Hair*. Dowden's counterpart in the Shaftesbury Theatre *Hair* band, and who features on the 1968 and 1970 cast albums, was guitarist and singer Alex Harvey. Harvey became successful in the 1970s with his Sensational Alex Harvey Band (who would support The Who at Charlton Athletic Football Ground in front of an audience of 60,000 in May 1976). Their live performances were notable for a highly visual style which involved the use of flamboyant costumes and Pierrot-influenced stage make-up; the latter reminiscent of that worn by the cast of *Godspell*.

<sup>75</sup> Warfield, 'From *Hair*', *Cambridge Companion*, p.237.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *Godspell* in London

#### 8.1 Production, marketing, and working methods

With a new (but rarely-used) subtitle of *The Gospel Rock-Musical*, *Godspell* opened at the Round House in Chalk Farm, London, on 17 Nov 1971 and ran until 22 January 1972 before transferring to Wyndham's Theatre in the West End four days later. As with *Hair*, the key creative personnel crossed the Atlantic to re-stage their hit production: Tebelak directed; Schwartz, credited as Musical Director, was responsible for rehearsing his score with the cast prior to the UK opening, and Susan Tsu recreated her colourful, rag-tag costume design.<sup>1</sup> The first *Godspell* national tour opened, less than a year after the Round House premiere, in Newcastle on 7 Nov 1972. Another tour, launched one month after the closure of the Wyndham's production in November 1974, returned the show promptly to the West End – this time at the Phoenix Theatre – for a twelve-week run beginning on 10 June 1975.<sup>2</sup>

Those responsible for marketing *Godspell* were keen to stress the parallels with the prompt, global 'franchising' of *Hair*. Their souvenir programme stated that *Godspell* had, by 1972,

and with an acceleration that even surpassed the proliferation of HAIR companies around the world ... [begun] its sudden journey into the hearts of the multitudes. Los Angeles, London, Hamburg, Boston, Melbourne, Paris, Washington, Toronto, San Francisco, Amsterdam, Chicago and three touring companies, one in Great Britain and two in the United States, followed in short order. It might be said today that GODSPELL is the world's most popular musical.

Indeed, while the 1973 movie of the show would prove to be neither a critical nor commercial success (largely due to the uninspired filmic treatment by David Greene) the producers could already boast that 'a film which has picked its cast

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<sup>1</sup> *Godspell* Round House and Wyndham's Theatre production programmes, both undated, Museum of London; Soper, email, 19/06/2006; Prompt copy of *Godspell* script from first London production, Theatre Collection, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, THM/178.

<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, 22/09/1972; 28/05/1975; *The Stage and Television Today*, 19/12/1974; 19/06/1975.

members from five North American GODSPELL companies is being produced by Edgar Lansbury for Columbia Pictures'.<sup>3</sup>

While it is unlikely that Hair's authors and producers would have concurred with the claim that *Godspell* 'might' be 'the world's most popular musical', they could not have failed to notice the similarity between the image used on all posters, programmes and publicity material for *Godspell* and that for *Hair*. While the *Godspell* image is simpler and – significantly – not drenched in the colour-saturation associated with psychedelia, both posters featured a solitary long-haired male (a trope which recurs in the poster for the *Tommy* film). *Godspell*'s producers also drew frequent *Hair* parallels in their publicity material. They stated, for example, that 'not since the "hairesy" of HAIR has such an unpretentious, loving and ingenuous piece of work cast itself upon the global doorstep to be cherished by innocent and cynic alike'.<sup>4</sup> This claim of genealogical descent from *Hair* makes the choice of UK co-producers for *Godspell* all the more incongruous; if highly astute. While the Lord Chamberlain's office may have conceded, somewhat grudgingly, that Harold Fielding Ltd. and James Verner Ltd. were, as potential producers of *Hair*, 'reasonably reputable organisations', neither were in the same entrepreneurial league as H.M Tennent Ltd.<sup>5</sup> The *Godspell* programme adopts a suitably reverential tone to recount that

American producers Lansbury, Duncan and Beruh joined one of London's most esteemed and prestigious managements in presenting the British version of GODSPELL. H.M. TENNENT Limited, under the direction of Hugh Beaumont, has been responsible for more hits since its inception in 1936 than virtually any other London West End producing firm ... GODSPELL is another example of Mr Beaumont's impeccable sense of what makes good theatre.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Godspell Around the World*, V & A. The first of the Rock Opera films to be released is the weakest of the four. As *The Times* noted, *Godspell* was 'exposed' on screen 'as having a severely restricted idea'. While 'the film's principal addition is to use New York locations', these 'seem oddly arbitrary in selection'. Many critics agreed that 'the miming of parables... is very much a stage device; on the screen and in close-up it has a selfconscious and amateur look'. The result resembled 'an improvised school nativity play'. *The Times* concluded, notably, that 'perhaps it was all done much too quickly, to grab the market before *Jesus Christ Superstar*'. *The Times*, 01/06/1973.

<sup>4</sup> *Godspell Around the World*, V & A.

<sup>5</sup> Johnston, Memo to Cobbold, 27/05/1968, LR 1968/2 HAIR, BL.

<sup>6</sup> *Godspell Around the World*, V & A.



The *Godspell* publicity image on a programme for the Round House production.



Tennents, under the legendary Hugh 'Binkie' Beaumont, was still, in 1971-72, the most prestigious and powerful of the commercial West End producers. As one *Godspell* cast member has expressed it, H.M. Tennent was '*the big important management*'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is no exaggeration to state that all the main tributaries of the institutional histories of commercial theatre in Britain over the preceding century flowed, by the early 1970s, through Tennents. Bearing in mind Dan Rebellato's two caveats that 'the financial arrangements of the theatres in the late forties' – and beyond – 'are immensely complicated', and, therefore, 'the networks and chains of different parties can be bewildering', the history of Tennents merits, nonetheless, brief consideration.<sup>8</sup>

In 1929, Harry Moncrief Tennent invited 21 year-old Beaumont to join Moss Empires, which had, over the preceding decades, formed the largest chain of variety and music-hall theatres throughout the provinces and, later, the south of England. Beaumont's job was to diversify Moss Empires into 'legitimate', dramatic theatre; while maintaining their pre-eminence as a variety and music-hall producer. Having achieved this, Tennant and Beaumont were invited to repeat their success with Howard and Wyndham; another theatrical giant which had been as dominant in the management of theatres producing drama as Moss Empires in the field of variety. The rise of cinema in the 1920s, and the 'talkies' in 1930s, resulted in a sharp decline in business for Howard and Wyndham. To arrest that decline, Tennent 'persuaded Moss Empires and Howard and Wyndham to amalgamate for the promotion of legitimate theatre and to appoint him and Binkie as their executive chiefs'. In 1936, Tennent and Beaumont left Howard and Wyndham to start their own firm, named H.M. Tennent. On Tennent's death in 1941 Binkie Beaumont became managing director of H.M. Tennent. Tennents – in its dual role as both a *producer* of plays and a *manager* of theatres – would, in the pre- and post-war decades, launch and further the careers of, amongst numerous playwrights and actors, Noël Coward, Terence Rattigan, Robert Bolt,

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<sup>7</sup> Gay Soper, email to the author, 19/06/2006.

<sup>8</sup> Rebellato, *1956*, p.55.

Dame Marie Tempest, John Gielgud, Edith Evans, Margaret Rutherford, Peggy Ashcroft, Vivien Leigh and Eileen Atkins.<sup>9</sup>

Beaumont's ongoing, central presence in the theatre of the early 1970s may seem, from a twenty-first century perspective, somewhat anachronistic; a relic from the immediate pre- and post-war theatrical age. Binkie had established his position during the decades when (working under the financial burden of Entertainment Tax, first imposed in 1916) a commercial producer – not the *director* of any theatre piece – had absolute power to hire and fire all parties concerned.<sup>10</sup> Despite Beaumont's appointment, by 1964, to the board of the National Theatre, Tennents remained steeped in the cultural traditions of British variety and dramatic theatre in the pre-television era.<sup>11</sup> At face value, therefore, it is difficult to envisage a more unlikely producer than this purveyor of 'well-made' plays and genteel comedies for a show which was more than happy to advertise itself as a descendant (albeit a 'clean' one) of *Hair*.

Above all, however, Tennents was an astute and pragmatic commercial company which existed to stage pieces which would return a profit. H.M. Tennent had gambled, unsuccessfully, on the new 'Rock Opera' genre when, in 1969, they collaborated with Lewnestein-Delfont Productions Ltd to bring *Your Own Thing* from New York for its short run at the Comedy Theatre.<sup>12</sup> Despite that flop, *Godspell* would prove that, at least in commercial terms, 'Mr Beaumont's impeccable sense of what makes good theatre' did indeed remain intact. According to Kitty Black, longstanding employee of Tennents and confidant of Beaumont, H.M. Tennent Ltd. produced approximately 350 plays between 1936 and 1973. Of these, only eight, including *Godspell*, ran for longer than 1,000 performances. At 1,192 performances, *Godspell* was the sixth longest-running production in H.M. Tennent's history. It was beaten only by the 1941 premiere of Coward's *Blythe Spirit*, the first British production of Richard Rogers and Oscar

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Huggett: *Binkie Beaumont: Eminence Grise of the West End Theatre 1933-1973* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), pp. 85, 88, 89, 97-98, 265, 511.

<sup>10</sup> Rebellato, 1956, p.53.

<sup>11</sup> Shellard, *British Theatre*, p.109.

<sup>12</sup> *Your Own Thing*, Comedy Theatre programme, 1969.

Hammerstein II's *Oklahoma* in 1947, and the 1958 London premiere of Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe's musical version of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion, My Fair Lady*. *Godspell* ran for longer than the 1958 UK premiere of Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim's *West Side Story*.<sup>13</sup>

Richard Huggett wrongly excludes *Godspell* from the three Tennent productions (including Ronald Mavor's *A Private Matter* and a revival of Coward's *Private Lives*) which he claims were running when Beaumont died at the age of 65 in March 1973. Indeed, Huggett cites the brief nudity of *A Private Matter* as 'Binkie's only gesture towards the 1970s,' but neglects to include his bold co-production of *Godspell*, which would be Tennents most atypical choice of play during Binkie's lifetime, and his swansong.<sup>14</sup> Tennents would continue to trade after Beaumont's death. The death of Sir Noël Coward at the age of 73, within a week of Binkie's, seemed to signify, however, a profound generational shift at the top of the London theatre hierarchy. While *Hair*, *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* dominated the West End, the curtain had come down on two of the most influential stalwarts of 'the old hegemony of the actor-manager and impresario'.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, that a 'clean' *Hair*, co-produced by Tennents, should open at the Round House (scene of such seminal 'counter-cultural' events as the *IT* launch party) compounds the juxtaposition of – or further erodes the perceived division between – the 'mainstream' and the 'counter-cultural'. The choice of venue was, however, serendipitous. That the Round House should host *Godspell* also reveals that, notwithstanding both the success of *Hair* and Beaumont's role as *Godspell* producer, managers of West End theatres still thought conservatively, in programming terms. As the young actor who first played Jesus, David Essex, has explained, *Godspell* 'rehearsals were going on and on without a definite opening date'. As the cast 'found out later', this was because the show 'was supposed to open at the Prince of Wales theatre'; the type of venue in which an H.M. Tennant production could expect to find a home, and to which *Catch My Soul* had

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<sup>13</sup> Kitty Black, *Upper Circle: A Theatrical Chronicle* (London: Methuen, 1984), pp.231-238.

<sup>14</sup> Huggett, *Binkie Beaumont*, pp.519-520.

<sup>15</sup> Yarrow and Frost, 'Great Britain', Yarrow (ed.) *European Theatre*, p.225.

transferred from the Round House months before. 'Midway through the rehearsals', however, 'somebody from the theatre group came down and saw these ten hippies chasing around with sawhorses and planks and red noses and they withdrew the theatre' and 'the only one that was free was the Round House'. As a result of the 'extraordinary' opening, with 'queues around Chalk Farm', the producers were then 'offered three West End theatres in the first week'.<sup>16</sup>

The majority of the cast (although not Essex) fitted the Beaumont model of a conventional theatre background as preparation for the West End (unlike, for example, *Hair's* Marianne Price). Moreover, while a considerable number of *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* alumni went on to become well-known performers, *Godspell*, using a much smaller cast of actors, all of whom were hitherto little-known, launched even more successful careers. David Essex would become a household name, particularly for his many female fans, as a high-selling pop star in Britain in the 1970s and beyond.<sup>17</sup> He scored two number one singles in the mid-seventies while simultaneously forging a career as a respected actor. Notably, he played, during a three-month break from his *Godspell* run, the lead role of Jim MacLaine in the film *That'll Be The Day* (Claude Whatham, UK, 1973) – which also featured Keith Moon and Ringo Starr – and its sequel *Stardust* (Michael Apted, UK, 1974). These two intelligent and well-received films recount the journey of a fictional pop star (Essex) from the early days of British rock and roll in the 1950s to success, and its attendant commercial and personal pressures, in the music industry of the mid-1970s.<sup>18</sup> In 1978, Essex appeared as Che in the UK premiere of Lloyd Webber and Rice's *Evita* (alongside former *Hair* actress Elaine Paige in the title role). In 1971, however, the 23 year-old was a drummer with only limited acting experience in pantomimes, a handful of conventional musical-comedy tours, and as an understudy in the ill-fated *Your*

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<sup>16</sup> Essex, *A Charmed Life*, p.92; David Essex, interviewed on *The Janice Forsyth Show*, BBC Radio Scotland, first broadcast 02/02/2008.

<sup>17</sup> Essex's first hit single 'Rock On', which reached number three in the UK charts in December 1973, is dramatically different from his later work. Featuring surreal lyrics and minimal accompaniment, consisting predominantly of percussion and unison strings, it earned Essex a Grammy nomination in the USA.

<sup>18</sup> Essex's songs 'Gonna Make You A Star' and 'Hold Me Close' reached number one in November 1974 and October 1975. Despite the up-tempo nature of the music, the lyrics of the former are a deceptively dark commentary on the commercial nature of the record industry. The subject-matter is, therefore, very similar to that of the film *Stardust*.

*Own Thing*.<sup>19</sup> Having ‘starved in blues bands from the age of 14’ and, because his ‘first child was on the way’, Essex was on the point of abandoning his show-business ambitions. He therefore approached his *Godspell* audition with the view that “if I don’t get this I think I’ll get a proper job”. Essex recalls that, particularly due to the relatively recent lifting of the Lord Chamberlain’s restriction on the portrayal of Jesus onstage, there were ‘thousands’ seeking the role which would make him a ‘new, hot, young actor’.<sup>20</sup>

Essex found elements of the audition process taxing. He was alongside ‘twenty or so boys and girls’ on the ‘short list’

and after a communal warm-up, we were put through some ‘trust-enhancing’ exercises with the group, things like falling off a table and trusting others to catch you ... It was a long session, in which we sang, danced, mimed, became trees and animals – the lot. Some of this I was uncomfortable with, especially being monkeys, but I kept going.

Composer Stephen Schwartz was immediately convinced that Essex was the right actor to play Jesus. Tebelak was, however, more inclined to cast Murray Head as Jesus – a role he had already played on the 1970 LP recording of *Jesus Christ Superstar* – with Essex as John the Baptist/Judas. When Head made himself unavailable by accepting film work, Essex won the opportunity to be the first to portray Jesus in the West End.<sup>21</sup>

At the age of 25, Gay Soper was already an experienced stage and television actress whose first professional job had been in an H.M. Tennent revival of *My Fair Lady*. She had then established herself as ‘a “Juvenile Lead” in the West End’. She has continued to play leading West End roles into the twenty-first century. Soper recalls that, while appearing in ‘a weird play’ in York in 1971 she was invited by Tennents to audition ‘for this new Rock Musical.’ Her reactions were mixed: while aware that *Godspell* was an off-Broadway hit, and ‘really excited’ by the opportunity to work again for Tennents, Gay ‘hated rock music and all its connotations of drug taking and swearing and hippie type living’. She

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<sup>19</sup> *The Stage and Television Today*, 09/12/1971.

<sup>20</sup> Essex, *Janice Forsyth Show*, 02/02/2008.

<sup>21</sup> Essex, *A Charmed Life*, pp.90-1.

'couldn't imagine ... getting involved in such a piece, let alone being ASKED for!' On receiving the script she thought it 'utter rubbish'. Nonetheless, Gay went for the *Godspell* audition, during which she 'had to improvise a version of the tale of the Good Samaritan, using as many silly voices, accents, walks, etc etc as I could think of. I was in my element.' Between its opening in 1971 until a matter of months before its closure in November 1974 Soper was one of the longest-serving members of the *Godspell* company. Her solo song was 'Turn Back Oh Man'.<sup>22</sup>

Essex and Soper were joined by Jeremy Irons, who was cast in the dual role of John the Baptist/Judas. Irons would subsequently work during the mid-1970s on the BBC Television *Play School* spin-off programme *Play Away*, alongside *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* alumnus Floella Benjamin.<sup>23</sup> He became internationally famous through the global success of ITV's lavish 1981 adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* and would subsequently win a Best Actor Academy Award for *Reversal of Fortune* (directed by Barbet Schroeder, 1990). In 1971, however, Irons 'had only been working for about three years'.<sup>24</sup>

Amongst the female cast members was Julie Covington. She would later appear in the world premiere of former *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* actor Richard O'Brien's *Rocky Horror Show*. A pastiche of 1940s B-Movies, 1950s rock and roll and early 1970s 'Glam Rock', *The Rocky Horror Show* would open at the Royal Court Theatre's 'experimental', 63-seat Theatre Upstairs in June 1973 for an initial run of one month. Covington would then sing the title role on Lloyd Webber and Rice's 1976 concept recording of *Evita*; their first work after *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Her single of 'Don't Cry For Me Argentina' from *Evita* reached number one in the UK charts in December 1976. Covington also played the central

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<sup>22</sup> The *Evening Standard* reported that, early in *Godspell*'s run, Gay Soper used the *ad lib* opportunities provided by this song to quip 'Hiya Charlie' to audience-member HRH The Prince of Wales. This comment raised a smile from Prince Charles while 'the audience stood and applauded'. The paper quoted Gay's subsequent description of the Prince as "'really dishy'". *Evening Standard*, 28/01/1972.

<sup>23</sup> *Play Away* (1971-1984) was a regular, weekly fixture for children in the late-afternoon Saturday schedule of BBC2. It featured an ensemble company (often dressed in deliberately low-budget, rag-tag costumes) who presented a mixture of pop-musical numbers and Music Hall-inspired comedy routines; making some elements of the show highly reminiscent of the style of *Godspell*.

<sup>24</sup> Soper, email, 19/06/2006.

character in both seasons of Howard Schuman's extraordinary Thames Television series for ITV, *Rock Follies* and *Rock Follies of '77*. Based upon former *Hair* actress Annabel Leventon's experiences as a woman in the music business of the 1970s, *Rock Follies*, with music by Andy Mackay of UK 'art rock' band Roxy Music, remains a unique example of a contemporary rock-musical series created specifically for British television.<sup>25</sup> Covington's career as a dramatic stage actress flourished in the 1980s. In 1971, however, she was a graduate of Cambridge University (and its Footlights) who had recorded one, commercially unsuccessful album for EMI-Columbia records.<sup>26</sup>

Robert Lindsay, who would become one of Britain's most well-known actors over the next three decades, took over the role of Jesus in December 1973 at the suggestion of David Essex; the pair having worked together on the film *That'll Be The Day*.<sup>27</sup> Marti Webb, who would succeed Elaine Paige in the role of *Evita* in 1980 (the same year in which her recording of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Don Black's one-woman show *Tell Me On A Sunday* was released) was, along with Gay Soper, one of 'the two most experienced' members of the original *Godspell* cast.<sup>28</sup>

Both Soper and Essex were, however, taken aback by the composer and director's opening statements to their cast. Essex recalls Tebelak 'trying to explain the attitude of the production. "We play Jesus as a red-nosed clown", John Michael enthused. The people could be barmy, I thought'.<sup>29</sup> Soper's serious doubts also lingered:

When we started rehearsals I thought it was amateurish and would fail utterly. The 'choreography' was undisciplined and sloppy; the singing required was 'natural', and at the beginning of rehearsals I thought the childishness of the show was a bit embarrassing. And I hated the costumes!

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<sup>25</sup> *Rock Follies* (Thames Television, 1976) and *Rock Follies of '77* (Thames Television, 1977) were released in the UK in 2002 by Freemantle Media as DVDs FHED8145 and FHED8147.

<sup>26</sup> Julie Covington, *The Beautiful Changes*, Columbia (UK) SCX 6466, 1971, consists of music by Pete Atkins with lyrics by Australian writer and critic Clive James.

<sup>27</sup> *The Stage and Television Today*, 06/12/1973; Essex, *A Charmed Life*, p.108.

<sup>28</sup> Soper, email, 19/06/2006.

<sup>29</sup> Essex, *A Charmed Life*, p.91.

As with *Hair*, the *Godspell* costumes were homespun and emphatically non-glamorous. Gay recalls that they consisted of 'bits and pieces' such as 'silly hats, brightly coloured socks' and 'hot pants' which were 'thrown together, all unmatching'. John the Baptist/Judas wore a 'ringmaster's costume with black tailcoat', while the 'girls' wore their hair 'in pigtails' or 'in bunches tied with ribbons'. For their 'tribal' make-up, the London cast 'drew on each other's faces' with 'cheap, coloured make-up crayons'.

Despite her many initial reservations, however, Soper came to 'enjoy rehearsals immensely', and 'did catch this community spirit which embraced us all, cast, crew, stage management, understudies'. She summarizes this working atmosphere as 'the spirit of the age, the child like approach to life. It grew on me!' The presence of writer-director Tebelak, who Gay 'adored', helped her warm to the piece. She recalls him being 'high as a kite a lot of the time', and surmises that, while she does not 'remember seeing him smoking cannabis ... I guess he must have!' Tebelak was happy for the London cast to make changes to his script. As a result,

our show was different from the US one, in the sense that they wanted us to make all the jokey references more English if the original joke had been something Brits wouldn't quite 'get'. So we did add some British comic characters, and all our accents of course were our own. But this wasn't a pressure. It was just a natural thing they decided to do to make it more understandable to a British audience.<sup>30</sup>

Another company member recalls that the 'music-hall style' was emphasised, and the company added, for example, 'references to Marks and Spencers and British Home Stores.' A copy of the prompt script in the Victoria and Albert museum confirms that many US English idioms were altered for the London production. It remained 'suitably the culture' that, throughout the three-year run, the company 'could put in anything they wanted', with Tebelak content that the script 'wasn't set'.<sup>31</sup> Of his directing style, Gay Soper recalls that Tebelak staged the piece by osmosis. Somehow, whatever it was he said, or didn't say, just seemed to filter into one's brain without cogent thoughts. We just sort of

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<sup>30</sup> Soper, email, 19/06/2006.

<sup>31</sup> Francesca Faulkner-Greatorex, interview with the author conducted on 26/01/2006; Prompt copy of *Godspell* script, V & A.



'knew' how to do the show. I am not sure if everyone in the cast felt that. It is certainly what I felt.<sup>32</sup>

A productive 'community spirit' was commonplace amongst the London *Godspell* company of 1971-74. David Essex recalls, more than three decades later, that, despite his initial reservations, *Godspell* remains 'probably the closest company I've ever worked with'.<sup>33</sup> This happy atmosphere embraced 22 year-old Technical Assistant Stage Manager Francesca Faulkner-Greatorex, who joined the production in 1974. Francesca had worked professionally for only two years when she took over responsibility for mixing the sound for *Godspell* from a desk at the back of the Wyndham's Theatre auditorium. She would work on numerous West End musical hits in subsequent decades, including *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita*. Francesca recalls that, in 1974, and 'from the outset prior to my being there', the *Godspell* working ethos 'was to really get a big company spirit'. To that end, the cast 'had turned the number one dressing room at Wyndham's into the green room which everybody was encouraged to go and sit in'. 'That is unusual', she notes, in the commercial theatre of the West End (where contracts invariably assign the most luxurious dressing-room to the 'star' of the show). This unusual back-stage arrangement reflected, however, the 1971-4 *Godspell* company's embrace of what Francesca calls 'the time of the group hug and all that'. Therefore, while she is 'sure there was the odd bit of bickering', she recalls that 'the working rapport was pretty good' between 'musicians, stage management, sound and everyone else'.<sup>34</sup> Gay Soper confirms that the musicians were an integral part of the company, not least because 'the band were up on a high rostrum at the back of the stage in full view of the audience. They could watch the show as well as play and thus they became far more involved with us, and we them, than was usual in shows until then'.<sup>35</sup> Francesca is in no doubt that the

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<sup>32</sup> Soper, email to the author, 20/06/2006. The experience of actress Jenny Richards, who was directed by Tebelak in 1979 for a *Godspell* UK tour, could not have been more different. When her cast heard that 'John-Michael was coming it was like a meeting with the great Yogi'. She found, however, that 'he wasn't really capable of directing the piece at all'. 'When he was directing Jesus at the end he did it by counting numbers ... first you put your hand up, then you count to three, then you say your line, count a beat of four.' Richards found the process 'disappointing.' Jenny Richards, email to the author, 13/06/2006.

<sup>33</sup> Essex, *Janice Forsyth Show*, 02/02/2008.

<sup>34</sup> Faulkner-Greatorex, interview, 26/01/2006.

<sup>35</sup> Soper, email, 19/06/2006.

*Godspell* company's attempt to create a small, self-contained community was sincere: 'they were really trying for that unity'.<sup>36</sup>

This 'unity' did not, however, spill over into the kind of backstage behaviour which Marianne Price observed in *Hair* and which Francesca Faulkner-Greatorex encountered when she joined the company of *Jesus Christ Superstar* at the end of 1974 (as will be considered in Chapter Eleven). Francesca recalls the *Godspell* performers as a more 'pristine' and 'much more ... serious company'. David Essex confirms that, 'considering our age and how successful the show was, the cast were very professional and ... rarely did we get up to mischief on stage'.<sup>37</sup> There was, however, a practical constraint on any potential misbehaviour or off-stage excess. Unlike the far larger casts of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Hair*, the ten-strong *Godspell* cast (and four-piece band) 'were all on stage all at the same time the entire run, for the entire show'. The actors were, in effect, playing ten principal roles; each of which featured at least one solo song. With no Chorus or 'Tribe' within which to hide, 'you wouldn't have got away with it there'.<sup>38</sup>

Gay Soper, likewise, does not 'believe' that drugs or alcohol were part of the culture of the *Godspell*, but concedes that

maybe it went on and I didn't know about it. I mean maybe *after* the show people would have a drink or three, sure; maybe some people smoked dope, but I don't think they did actually. But 'indulgence' in the sense of too much, I would say, no not at all.<sup>39</sup>

Again, the practicalities of performing 'a really tough show' which 'needed phenomenal energy' were the most important consideration. Gay is of the opinion, informed by her experience of the 'nightmare' of Fridays and Saturdays, 'when we had to do four shows, back to back, at 5 and 8 on each day' with 'about half an hour between the two shows', that 'you can't really do eight shows of a hard physical show like *Godspell* unless you are really alert, awake and stone cold sober'. Indeed, 'by half way through a second show on a Friday' she 'used to

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<sup>36</sup> Faulkner-Greatorex, interview, 26/01/2006.

<sup>37</sup> Essex, *A Charmed Life*, p.99.

<sup>38</sup> Faulkner-Greatorex, interview, 26/01/2006.

<sup>39</sup> Soper, email, 19/06/2006.

wonder how one was going to get through to the end, and then to face doing two more the next day!’<sup>40</sup> Moreover, Gay recalls only ‘very little, but some’ sex within the company. ‘Mostly’, she states, ‘we all felt like brothers and sisters’. Physical exertion on stage seems, therefore, to have been the only excessive behaviour amongst the *Godspell* performers. Gay summarizes the distinction between her company and that playing at the Shaftesbury thus: ‘I think *Hair* was a different case all together’, whereas ‘I’d say we were all really quite “normal”!’

Gay and her colleagues did consider themselves to be part of a ‘jolly exciting’ new theatrical genre. Both she and Francesca Faulkner-Greatorex state, however, that the *Godspell* company – with only one exception, and only to some degree – did not feel that what they were doing was, or should have been considered, ‘revolutionary’ in a *political* sense. Yet there was revolutionary political activity in their vicinity; some of it conducted by the sibling Redgrave actors, Vanessa and Corin. Soper recalls that ‘every time the Workers Revolutionary Party dropped their leaflets in, or Vanessa Redgrave tried to come and talk to us ... all of us except Julie Covington thought they were a bunch of idiots’. To the vast majority of the company they were ‘a pain in the ass’. While she has no recollection of the event (which perhaps confirms her avowed lack of interest), Gay was recently reminded by a *Godspell* colleague ‘that Corin Redgrave took a whole bunch of us to the pub’. It may have been on this same occasion that Vanessa Redgrave did, eventually, persuade some of the company (although not Gay) to listen – in vain – to her political concerns. Gay recalls that

the musicians gave Vanessa a really bad time and we had such a laugh. She earnestly entreated them about whatever it was – Chile, or striking, or some other issue. And they carried on drinking and smoking and just let her rant on. After about fifteen minutes there was a slight pause for breath, and Don Lawson, our drummer, leant across to her, patted her knee, and said to her ‘Never mind, darling. You’ve got lovely thighs’. He told some of us that story the next night. We laughed and laughed.

This encounter would appear to confirm that ‘I don’t think we thought of [*Godspell*] as counter culture at all’. Indeed, Soper stresses, as Chapter Twelve will consider, that ‘the established Church came and adored it’, as did many members

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<sup>40</sup> Soper, email, 20/06/2006.

of the Royal Family including Prince Charles on two occasions; The Queen Mother, and Princesses Anne, Margaret and Alexandra ‘and I don’t think any of them’ (perhaps, one might speculate, especially not *Hair* aficionado Princess Anne) ‘thought they were going to anything risky’.

Neither Royal patronage, nor the blessing of leading churchmen, nor even a positive reception from theatergoers was, however, anticipated by the cast prior to the show’s opening. Therefore, ‘when, on the first preview, the entire audience rose to their feet and gave us a massive standing ovation, (which was repeated after every single performance from then on, for the entire run of the show)’, Gay Soper ‘could hardly believe ... how deeply it was affecting people’. With more than three decades of theatrical experience to compare it to, she still considers *Godspell* to have been ‘the most incredible thing to be involved with’ and finds it ‘quite phenomenal’ that ‘in terms of music and a piece of theatre, it moved people to tears and to laughter and to rapturous applause at the end’.<sup>41</sup> David Essex, despite all his subsequent years of success in various branches of show-business, similarly recalls the ‘extraordinary’ experience of ‘people sobbing ... at the Crucifixion and everything else’.<sup>42</sup>

## 8.2 Critical reaction

London’s theatre critics reacted as viscerally as its audiences to *Godspell*. Critical responses were, however, polarized between the ecstatic – which resulted in some reviews which the self-deprecating Essex describes, three decades later, as ‘ridiculous’ – and the disparaging.<sup>43</sup> Harold Hobson of *The Sunday Times* was the most zealous reviewer. He noted, as did Soper and Essex, that “‘Godspell’” has a great effect upon the audience. Twice at least it lays upon the crowded house that breathless silence which great actors were once able to impose at will, but which in the theatre today is exceedingly rare’. Hobson was delighted that ‘in “Godspell” there is not even a suspicion of showing off ... vulgar exhibitionism is now a detestable feature of nearly all musicals, but there is none of it in

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<sup>41</sup> Soper, email, 20/06/2006.

<sup>42</sup> Essex, *Janice Forsyth Show*, 02/02/2008.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

“Godspell””. Above all, however, Hobson was of the ‘firm opinion’ that David Essex’s performance surpassed even that at the Old Vic of the Artistic Director of the National Theatre, Sir Laurence Olivier, in the National’s production, directed by Michael Blakemore, of *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* by Eugene O’Neill. Hobson considered Essex’s Jesus ‘the best performance in London, the least histrionic, the happiest, and the most moving. That it should be so at a time we all marvel at Olivier’s prodigious James Tyrone, one of our greatest actor’s finest creations, is a measure of Mr Essex’s achievement’.<sup>44</sup> This placed Hobson in the same critical camp as Pete Townshend who, more prosaically, ‘really liked’ Essex ‘the first time I saw him in *Godspell*: ‘he was fucking great’.<sup>45</sup> Hobson contributed to the debate over the religious content of the Rock Operas by placing *Godspell* firmly within the centuries-old tradition of Western devotional art when he declared Tebelak and Schwartz’s Jesus, as embodied by Essex, to be ‘a Christ worthy of El Greco’.<sup>46</sup>

A more contemporary comparison was made by Irving Wardle, who declared the *Godspell* songs were ‘musically as good as any we have heard since *Hair*’.<sup>47</sup> Many reviewers stressed the *Hair* connection; but, equally, the relative ‘cleanliness’. Arthur Thirkell, for example – unable, like most reviewers, to resist a quasi-biblical quip – declared ‘Verily, it’s a hit’ and called *Godspell* ‘the gayest, most unusual musical in years’. ‘Performed by a young cast simply oozing pep and personality’ who got a ‘well deserved’ ‘standing ovation at the end’, Thirkell felt that ‘this fresh, cheeky approach to the Gospels works marvellously’ and was, notably, ‘not at all in bad taste’.<sup>48</sup> Generic advertisements in the press for the Round House run likewise juxtaposed *Hair* comparisons with ‘good taste’. *Godspell*’s producers were happy to quote the *Daily Express*’ endorsement of a show ‘rocking in clean, hippy and happy exultant rock songs’ which were as ‘good as anything out of Hair’, and *The Observer*’s assurance that ‘you can safely take

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<sup>44</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 27/02/1972.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Barnes and Pete Townshend, *The Story of Tommy* (Twickenham: Eel Pie Publishing Ltd., 1977), p.122.

<sup>46</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 27/02/1972.

<sup>47</sup> *The Times*, 18/11/1971.

<sup>48</sup> *The Daily Mirror*, 18/11/1971.

all the family'.<sup>49</sup> *The Evening News*, reporting on the transfer to Wyndham's, noted that 'this extraordinary musical charade', featuring 'the best ensemble work ... ever seen on the London stage', 'arrived in the West End ... to the kind of reception you associate with an evangelical meeting'.<sup>50</sup>

Not all critics, however, were uplifted. John Barber of *The Daily Telegraph* stressed that 'at the end the Crucifixion is simulated with complete reverence. None need be offended by the show as a whole'. Offence might be caused, however, 'by its theatrical puerility'.<sup>51</sup> Likewise, young *Guardian* critic Michael Billington did not conceal his contempt for *Godspell* on both theatrical and religious grounds. Billington was diligent in recording his praise for Schwartz's 'often superbly exhilarating' score and the cast who 'put across their numbers with enormous élan'. He conceded that 'judging by the number of people leaping ecstatically to their feet at the end, I presume its message got through'. In marked contrast, however, to his admiration for *Hair*, Billington felt that, in *Godspell*, 'every showbiz cliché' was 'untiringly exploited' as Saint Matthew's Gospel was turned 'into an unnerving combination of a Ralph Reader Gang Show, a sterilised version of "Hair" and some thing a trendy Kingsley Amis vicar might have dreamed up given limitless resources'. Above all, Billington was offended by the fact that 'the word "love" is bandied around without anyone pausing to define it'.<sup>52</sup> Barber was similarly conscientious in informing his readers of the 'simple happiness that many people may find infectious', but was as scathing as Billington about the 'childlike cavortings of "Godspell"'. He reported that 'a company of ten spring-heeled young people dress up in bright remnants from Mum's ragbag and jump around and sing like children at a school treat'. 'The company', he noted, 'manage to rejoice almost non-stop' while 'prancing around ... in mock-infantile style'. Barber concluded by admitting that he 'found the continual gladness wearing' due to 'a curmudgeonly disrelish for seeing adults mimicking children'. He 'freely' acknowledged, however, that, "'Godspell" may be much to the taste of others'.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> See, for example, *Evening Standard*, 26/11/1971.

<sup>50</sup> *The Evening News*, 02/02/1972.

<sup>51</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 18/11/1971.

<sup>52</sup> *The Guardian*, 18/11/1971.

<sup>53</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 18/11/1971.

It was not to the taste of *Time Out*, who made the only acknowledgement of the show in London's 'underground' press. For *Time Out*, *Godspell* was

Christ as Buttons in the pantomime of the parables. Theatrically, it's all good fun, a bit like 'The Young Generation' meet La Mama, with quotes from every experimental production you've ever seen welded together into a coherent whole by a glossy professional charm that will either delight you or make you throw up. But it's all so gratuitous: what happens on stage rarely has anything to do with the words that are spoken. Heavy Puritanism is converted into wordly zest for life at the wave of a magic theatrical wand. Hell-fire is extinguished by a music-hall routine. It only works if you don't think.<sup>54</sup>

*Time Out*, like Barber and Billington, failed to foresee that there would be a potential audience of younger people who, over the next four years, found *Godspell* to their taste precisely because of its 'childlike cavortings'. For adults as well as children, it also held the considerable appeal of a theatre work which departed radically from previous concepts of a 'religious play'. As *Hair* would doubtless – and understandably, due to the subject-matter – have been deemed unacceptable by many parents for their children, *Godspell* provided the opportunity for younger London theatregoers to see one of the new theatrical genre of Rock Opera. Indeed, the *Evening Standard* reported that one young family of four, including two children aged eight and eleven, went to see

Godspell ... the West End show that will run for ever, if only because patrons keep going back – at every level. Princess Margaret was at Wyndham's Theatre for her third visit to the show last night with Lord Snowdon making his second visit. They took along the children, Lady Sarah Armstrong Jones and Viscount Linley (first visit each) and spent 30 minutes backstage with the cast afterwards.<sup>55</sup>

David Essex's future commercial appeal to a young female audience was spotted early – and exploited shrewdly – by the show's producers, who arranged for *Mirabelle* magazine for girls to run an article and photo spread on the *Godspell* company.<sup>56</sup> In the sector of the *Godspell* audience to which *Mirabelle* may also have appealed was fourteen year-old Sue Griffiths, who saw the show with a classmate at Wyndham's Theatre in the early summer of 1972. They were drawn

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<sup>54</sup> *Time Out*, No.92, 19-25/11/1971.

<sup>55</sup> *Evening Standard*, 25/04/1973.

<sup>56</sup> 'Talking to the Cast', *Mirabelle*, 19/02/1972.

to the show precisely because it was part of the new Rock Opera wave. Sue thought, 'mainly because of our love of contemporary pop and rock music', that 'it would be exciting to see a musical that incorporated rock songs': although she 'had been to the theatre quite a bit' with her parents, 'mainly to straight plays and fairly traditional works', she 'hadn't been very interested in musicals and thought them rather old-fashioned in general'. The *Godspell* trip was radically different. Sue recalls, in 2008, 'how exciting the experience seemed to a rather naïve schoolgirl at that time'. She 'liked the songs a great deal' and, while considering it 'an ensemble piece', admits that she was 'rather struck with David Essex, and was certainly delighted to have the opportunity to obtain his autograph when the audience were invited on stage to have a sip of wine in the interval!'<sup>57</sup>

### **8.3 Coda: *Godspell* since the 1970s – 'community spirit appears to be dead these days'**

*Godspell* remains, in the twenty-first century, popular not only with young audiences but with young performers, both in Britain and around the world. While professional revivals are now rare, *Godspell* has become a surprisingly common theatrical rite of passage for many who work in British theatre. A survey conducted by the author in 2006 amongst the Standing Council of University Drama Departments (SCUDD) confirmed that it has become a popular and enduring choice of 'showcase' production for young actors in training. This is largely because it makes multiple demands of its cast of ten, all of whom must be able to not only sing and dance but also portray the rapid changes of character and style – from slapstick to pathos – required by the script. Edinburgh's Queen Margaret College (now University), for example, staged it in 1996, and again within a decade.<sup>58</sup> Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts in North London produced it in 1994-95 and again in 2006 (and mounted a production of *Hair* in

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<sup>57</sup> Sue Griffiths, emails to the author, 24/04/2008; 21/05/2008; 23/05/2008. Sue Griffiths would go on to work, in the twenty-first century, in the Musical Plays Department of Samuel French Ltd. This made her the first point of contact for anyone in the UK seeking to stage a performance of the show which she saw during its first London run.

<sup>58</sup> The author played the role of John the Baptist/Judas in Queen Margaret College's 1996 production, directed by Lynn Bains. This was the final production of his three years of NCDT/Equity-accredited acting training.



2004). *Godspell* is also a popular choice of production amongst youth theatres and schools.<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, Gay Soper considers that the most successful productions of *Godspell* she has seen 'are always the ones done by schools'. In contrast, Soper is of the opinion that, in recent decades, 'grown ups trying to do the show seem to be too hard, too cynical, too self promoting and too unloving to do it justice'. *Godspell* has become 'tricky to mount', she believes, 'because I think people have changed ... The world moved on from Hippiedom. People got all cynical again. That child-like optimism just couldn't last'.<sup>60</sup> *Times* critic Irving Wardle, so full of praise for the first production, admitted to a loss of optimism when reviewing the first major London revival in 1981. He pointed out that

highlights of Christian history in the past ten years include the rise of the moonies, the Jonestown massacre, and the establishment of cult deprogramming as an upcoming new profession. I would not dream of laying such spiritual conspiracies at the door of John-Michael Tebelak and Stephen Schwartz's synoptic rave-up; but it is a fact that the sight of a pack of obedient kids bounding their way through the parables under the hypnotic gaze of a pin-up Nazarene looks a good deal less harmless than it did when *Godspell* first burst upon the Round House audience 10 years ago.

Wardle concluded that 'the love generation is dead and gone'.<sup>61</sup>

After *Godspell*, John-Michael Tebelak never produced another theatre script of note. He worked sporadically as a director, chiefly in New York, and devoted most of his energies to staging liturgical drama for the city's Episcopalian Cathedral of Saint John the Devine. Tebelak died, suddenly, of a heart attack, in New York in April 1985 at the age of 36.<sup>62</sup> Stephen Schwartz contributed lyrics to composer Leonard Bernstein's negatively-received 1971 *MASS: A Theatre Piece for Singers, Players, and Dancers*. This large-scale piece, commissioned to open

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<sup>59</sup> Responses to the author's email of 20 November 2006 to the SCUDD academic mailing-list confirm that *Godspell* was also performed by students of Leeds University in 1997; the University of the West of England in 2000; the National Youth Theatre of Wales in 1988, and, since the late 1980s, by numerous other youth theatres (including several in Canada and Israel).

<sup>60</sup> Soper, email, 19/06/2006.

<sup>61</sup> *The Times*, 23/06/1981.

<sup>62</sup> *The Times*, 08/04/1985.

the John F. Kennedy Centre for the Performing Arts in Washington D.C., was Bernstein's sole attempt to integrate rock instrumentation and orchestral music. Schwartz then wrote music and lyrics for the 1972 Broadway hit musical *Pippin*.<sup>63</sup> He experienced renewed interest in his work from the 1990s onwards, providing lyrics to composer Alan Menken's songs for the animated Disney films *Pocahontas* (1995) and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) before writing both score and lyrics for the biggest global commercial success of his career, the 2003 musical *Wicked*.

Gay Soper believes that *Hair*, *Godspell*, *Tommy* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* still 'have relevance' in the twenty-first century, but she crystallizes the problem presented by *Godspell* since the 1970s as a cultural-political one: an absence of collective, societal 'community spirit'. Her comments on this theme harmonize, to some considerable extent, with many of the central 'spiritual' concerns of the counter-culture; expressed overtly in Pete Townshend's lyrics for *Tommy*. This congruence and lack of discord may surprise both the self-defined Counter-Culturalists, who chose to ignore *Godspell*, and Soper, who did not consider herself to be part of the counter-culture 'at all'. Yet she remains adamant that 'community spirit is the most important thing for *Godspell*, and no appreciable egos at work'; while acknowledging, that 'of course we all have egos but they must be subdued for the general good'. Gay is of the opinion that, sadly, 'community spirit' (which requires such subjugation of ego) 'appears to be dead these days'.<sup>64</sup> That one of the original London cast still – nearly four decades after it opened in the UK – feels passionately about 'the formation of a community' (the objective stated at the outset of the *Godspell* script) would doubtless delight its author.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> *Godspell Around the World*, V & A.

<sup>64</sup> Soper, email, 19/06/2006.

<sup>65</sup> *Godspell* Script, p.1.

## CHAPTER NINE

### *Tommy: the 1969 album*

#### 9.1 Origins and influences

Having examined *Hair* and *Godspell*, this thesis now returns to The Who's Rock Opera *Tommy*. Not only because it was the first work to be so called, but also because it largely escaped the criticisms of in-authenticity aimed by contemporaries at *Hair* and *Godspell*, *Tommy* could be seen as the definitive Rock Opera. As ever, genuineness was in the eye of the beholder, yet, as the next chapter will suggest, the ways in which *Tommy* was performed did indicate an important commercial shift within the music industry. As a precursor to that, this chapter addresses the album *Tommy*, paying particular attention to the intentions of its driving force, Pete Townshend.

On its release as a double-LP by Decca/MCA records in the USA on 17 May and in the UK by Track Records through Polydor on 23 May 1969, *Tommy* was very much a work-in-progress as a piece of drama.<sup>1</sup> It was, as the next chapter will address, refined through a process of extensive live performance by The Who during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and first orchestrated and sung by a full cast in a theatrical setting in the UK in 1972. That performance persuaded director Ken Russell of its filmic potential. Russell's movie was released in 1975, and Townshend further revised *Tommy* with director Des McAnuff for a full staging on Broadway and in the West End in the 1990s.

On the original album, *Tommy* is more linear than *Hair*, but contains huge gaps and points of narrative confusion. Although the musical achievement of an album sung and played solely by The Who remains impressive, and the songs are connected by their unity, repetition and development of musical themes, even the group's most ardent admirers have acknowledged that the plot of *Tommy* is vague, mysterious and frequently impenetrable. Indeed, the more detailed the attempts of the group's biographers – and chief composer Townshend – to

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<sup>1</sup> Charlesworth and Hanel, *The Who*, pp.34; Andy Neil and Matt Kent, *Anyway Anyhow Anywhere: The Complete Chronicle of The Who, 1958-1978* (London: Virgin Books, 2002), p.232.

analyze the narrative of events, the more elusive the dramatic through-line of *Tommy* has become.<sup>2</sup>

This is because, as one critic has stated bluntly, ‘the plot of *Tommy* is absurdity itself’.<sup>3</sup> It can be summarized as the story ‘of a boy, deaf, dumb and blind from a traumatic experience in childhood, restored to the use of his senses and portrayed as a kind of holy fool in the midst of corruption and hypocrisy’.<sup>4</sup> The dramatic potential of the work lies in the traumatic, opaque but relentless rites-of-passage of the eponymous protagonist towards what Townshend has described as ‘extreme high levels of consciousness’.<sup>5</sup> *Tommy*, therefore, much like *Hair*, is a work in which the themes and issues addressed *en route* are of greater significance than the sequence of the narrative. As Townshend’s occasional collaborator Richard Barnes has noted, ‘what was interesting’, in 1969, ‘about this so called “opera”’ was the ‘scope, breadth and intelligence’ of its content, which includes ‘murder, trauma, bullying, child molestation, sex, drugs, illusion, delusion, altered consciousness, spiritual awakening, religion, charlatanism, success, superstardom, faith, betrayal, rejection, and pinball’.<sup>6</sup>

To make sense of *Tommy*’s ‘Amazing Journey’ the listener frequently has to resort to Townshend’s accompanying lyric sheet, the presence of which was itself unusual in a rock album at this time. This did not, however, fully resolve the problems of comprehension, as Dave Marsh has identified:

Because *Tommy* was not conceived as a stage production ... there were no stage directions. Because Townshend had decided against outside singers and musicians, there was no cast; he and Daltrey assume almost all of the roles. The only narration, which is skeletal, is provided by the harmony vocals.

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Wilkerson, *Who Are You: The Life of Pete Townshend* (London: Omnibus, 2008), pp.106-114; Marsh, *Before*, pp.330-335; Charlesworth and Hanel, *The Who*, pp.34-36; Neil and Kent, *Anyway*, pp.219-225.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan Gibley, *The Independent*, 07/03/1996.

<sup>4</sup> Philippa Toomey, *The Times*, 25/08/1975.

<sup>5</sup> Unspecified interview about the release of *Tommy* from a West German television programme (possibly *Beat-Club*), interpolated into *Amazing Journey*.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Barnes, ‘Deaf, Dumb and Blind Boy’, *The Who, Tommy* (remixed and digitally remastered with new sleeve notes), Polydor UK CD 531 043-2, 1996, p.3.

As a result,

only Townshend – perhaps Lambert and, in some cases, one or two of the band members – knew the story that the lyrics or music meant to convey. Most often, no one outside the group could possibly have guessed. Townshend, either knowing or sensing this, filled in as only he could, by doing literally hundreds of – possibly a thousand – interviews, describing and explaining the *Tommy* story. Of course, since the action was sufficiently vague to confuse even Pete from time to time, his explanations were often contradictory, misleading or simply confusing.<sup>7</sup>

Townshend has confirmed that the rest of the group did not fully understand his intentions.<sup>8</sup> *Tommy* has been praised as ‘one great collage’ of Townshend’s ‘ideals and ideas’, but bass-player John Entwistle later recalled that as The Who worked on it in the studio ‘nobody knew what it was all about or how the hell it was going to end’.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless the album *Tommy*, as recorded between September 1968 and March 1969, was lauded upon its release, and in the decades since, as a milestone in rock music and a pivotal example of the historically-specific pop-rock ‘concept album’ which became so popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was not yet, however, a fully-fledged ‘opera’ – ‘Rock’ or otherwise. More accurately, The Who had committed to vinyl a song-cycle, a ‘Rock Cantata’. This nonetheless marked an audacious leap of creativity by the group’s chief composer and provider of creative impulse, Townshend.

As Townshend and Roger Daltrey have frequently acknowledged, however, Kit Lambert, the band’s co-manager and record producer, was central to the genesis and development of *Tommy*. Having reached a creative and commercial impasse (as discussed in Chapter Two) Pete Townshend was encouraged by Lambert to embrace the concept of a ‘rock opera’ as both a ‘last ditch bid to keep The Who going’ and an expression of Townshend’s personal ‘quest for curative salvation in

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<sup>7</sup> Marsh, *Before*, pp.329-330. For a particularly lengthy, rambling, and ultimately uninformative interview with Townshend in the underground press about the plot, see ‘*Tommy*, Pete Townshend and the Kitchen Sink’ in *Friends*, number 5, 14/04/1970. A similarly confusing, and on this occasion drug-fuelled, interview about Townshend’s plans for *Tommy* was published in *Rolling Stone*, number 18, 28/09/1968.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Pete and Tommy, among others’, by Rick Sanders & David Dalton, *Rolling Stone*, number 37, 12/07/1969.

<sup>9</sup> Charlesworth and Hanel, *The Who*, p.34; Cited in Marsh, *Before*, p.322.

... Indian mysticism'.<sup>10</sup> Lambert was well-qualified as a mentor for Townshend in the 'high arts' of ballet and opera.

A decade older than Townshend, he was the son of Constant Lambert, a composer most noted for his ballet scores and principal conductor at Vic-Wells, subsequently Sadler's-Wells, and ultimately Royal Ballet Company. Kit's godfather was the distinguished English composer Sir William Walton. After graduating from the University of Oxford he studied film in Paris with Alain Resnais and Jean-Luc Godard; like The Who's co-manager Chris Stamp, Lambert intended to pursue a career in cinema when he first encountered The Who.<sup>11</sup>

By 1968 Lambert (who maintained a private box, 'often used' by Townshend, at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden) was expressing publicly his disillusion with the art forms of his childhood.<sup>12</sup> In an interview for Tony Palmer's BBC *Omnibus* film *All My Loving* Lambert voiced his frustration that

however highbrow you wanna make it I still think that there is more valid, new, creative music being made at the pop end. I don't see any good classical composers emerging at the moment. I certainly haven't heard a decent new symphony or a decent new opera in the last eighteen months.

Perhaps in a deliberate attempt to goad his song-writing protégé Townshend, Lambert declared 'opera as we know it now' to be 'absolutely defunct. One needs a completely fresh approach and I think pop's gonna provide it. So I can see a Beatles opera on at Covent Garden ten years from now. I bet you'.<sup>13</sup> A Beatles opera would not transpire but, as Palmer noted in his *Times* obituary following Lambert's untimely death in 1981, 'his proudest moment, he liked to boast, was when in 1970 *Tommy* became the first work of contemporary popular music to be performed to a capacity audience in the Metropolitan Opera House, New York'.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Coveney, *The Observer*, 10/03/1996.

<sup>11</sup> *The Times*, 16/04/1981.

<sup>12</sup> Wilkerson, *Who*, p.41.

<sup>13</sup> *Omnibus – All My Loving*, BBC Television, directed by Tony Palmer, first broadcast 03/11/1968 on BBC2. Palmer's film was the first British television documentary to consider pop-rock music as an art-form worthy of intelligent inspection and analysis. This informative historical document was released on DVD as TPDVD101 by Isolde Films in 2007.

<sup>14</sup> *The Times*, 16/04/1981.

Prior to his 1968 prediction of an opera by a leading rock group, however, Lambert had embarked upon a process which Townshend has described as a 'grooming' of the young guitarist. As early as 1965, immediately after Townshend had written The Who's first hit single 'I Can't Explain' and was 'on [his] way' as a songwriter but 'just copying', Lambert had given Townshend an LP of the works of English composer Henry Purcell (1659-95). Purcell's Baroque suspensions deeply influenced the younger man. Lambert installed Townshend in a room above his own flat in Belgravia. There, the guitarist investigated Lambert's extensive record collection, which included Frank Sinatra and Duke Ellington. Again, however, it was the Baroque, particularly Purcell's 1691 incidental music for 'The Gordian Knot Unty'd' – which Lambert 'played all the time' – which made the deepest mark on the nascent song-writer.<sup>15</sup> When Townshend 'sat down and wrote all the demos for The Who's first album' it was 'just covered in those suspensions: "The Kids Are Alright" [and later] "I'm a Boy", they're full of them'.

'In that sense', Townshend has maintained consistently, his 'grooming' by Lambert in wider musical styles was more important to him than a concurrent education in social etiquette and fine wine.<sup>16</sup> Townshend recalls that 'about a year' after he began to write songs 'Kit Lambert started announcing to everyone that he thought I was a genius'. Lambert 'often used to fantasize about doing something on a grand scale, even then. I think it was his idea to do the mini-opera on the [second] album'. This was, Townshend realised subsequently, Lambert's tactic of 'pushing me to do things in a grander way. So even if I wasn't getting written about as a great writer, Kit Lambert was telling me I was a great writer. And I believed him, because I wanted to believe him'.<sup>17</sup> Lambert was not, for Townshend, 'just a manager and he wasn't just a record producer; he was a fantastic, extraordinary friend'; and one able to be profoundly moved by the creative possibilities of music, whether of the 1690s or the 1960s. Townshend has recalled being particularly affected by the occasion when Lambert first played him 'The Gordian Knot Unty'd'. Townshend 'heard it and went into the room and

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<sup>15</sup> Cited in Wilkerson, *Who*, pp.40-41. Townshend further expounded on the influence of Purcell in a lengthy interview with *Oz* magazine, number 21, May-June 1969.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Wilkerson, *Who*, p.41.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Marsh, *Before*, pp.223-4.

there were tears streaming down his face, because it was his father's favourite piece of music and it reminded him of his dad'.<sup>18</sup>

It was Lambert's influence which led to *Tommy* being labeled to the wider world, first by the group and then commercially, as a 'Rock Opera'. Townshend was initially wary of the term,

but Kit was fantastic, he kind of took me the other way ... I'd say, 'Are you sure it's OK to call this a rock opera,' and ... he'd say, 'Well, yeah of course it is,' and I'd say, 'Well the story's a bit dodgy at the moment', and he'd go 'Yeah, but all opera's got a stupid story,' and I realized later actually that some of his ambitions of course were to usurp the musical establishment.<sup>19</sup>

Townshend may not have demurred, therefore, from the opinion of Tony Palmer in *The Times* in 1981 that, 'although the words and music were mostly by Pete Townshend', 'it was Lambert's idea, and he alone who possessed the vision and energy to make that idea live'.<sup>20</sup>

Lambert's skills as a manager and artistic *éminence grise*, and his enormous creative input into the album, were not, however, matched by his technical ability as a record producer. Dave Marsh has noted that

The Who's records with Lambert at the helm never sounded as good as they could have (or should have, compared to contemporary records by The Beatles and Rolling Stones, for instance – a comparison that's especially relevant because The Who had access to the same facilities and engineers that those bands did).<sup>21</sup>

Richard Barnes has conceded that 'the original *Tommy* record sounded quite bland and flat' (necessitating extensive re-mixing by John Astley and Andy Macpherson from the original IBC eight-track tapes as well as re-mastering for the 1996 CD reissue). The sonic flaws in the original were a result, as Stamp has explained, of Lambert not being 'what you'd call an "ears" producer. He went for the feeling, the performance, rather than the faithfully reproduced note-perfect reproduction. He captured the essence, warts and all, of the studio sessions'.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cited in Wilkerson, *Who*, p.41.

<sup>19</sup> 1999 interview cited in *Ibid.*, p.114.

<sup>20</sup> *The Times*, 16/04/1981.

<sup>21</sup> Marsh, *Before*, p.222.

<sup>22</sup> Barnes, 'Deaf', *Tommy* CD, p.5.



Glyn Johns, erstwhile in-house engineer at IBC studios, has gone further. Having engineered or produced for The Kinks, The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, he was associate producer with The Who on their 'most successful album'; the 1971 follow-up to *Tommy*, *Who's Next*.<sup>23</sup> Johns considered *Tommy* to be

absolutely atrocious from a sound point of view. Embarrassing. I mean, Kit Lambert didn't have any idea whatsoever about how to make a record – none ... from a sound point of view. I'm sure had had wonderful ideas and he was a very explosive character. And I know, because Pete's told me on numerous occasions – they all have – that he did come up with great ideas and he was a great influence on the band. But he didn't know how to make records – not from an engineering point of view, at any rate.<sup>24</sup>

In the 1980s, however, Townshend was still championing 'Kit's real contribution' which 'will never, ever be known, because, of course, it wasn't production at all, it was far deeper'.<sup>25</sup>

Lambert's secular inspiration was matched by a newly-discovered influence which Townshend readily accepted as sacred, and which permeated every song in the *Tommy* cycle. As Townshend explained in 2004, 'when I was making *Tommy* I was very, very concerned to make sure that we dealt with [*long pause*] with something really quite [*pause*] deep'. This preoccupation came about because 'about a year before I started to write it I had come across an Indian spiritual master called Meher Baba and started to read about his message and was very inspired by it'.

The teachings of the Islamic mystic, or Sufi, Meher Baba, appeared to offer a route out of a personal, spiritual impasse for Townshend that matched a concomitant creative blockage as a song-writer. Townshend had concluded, immediately prior to *Tommy*, that the group increasingly 'did not fit in' with what was 'all around at the time, in pop', which he has summarized as 'a lot of acid, a lot of psychedelic drugs, a lot of psychedelic imagery' and 'a lot of ... hippy stuff

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<sup>23</sup> *Amazing Journey*. *Who's Next* was released as Decca 79182 in the USA on 14 August 1971 and Track 2408102 in the UK on 25 August 1971. The remixed and remastered CD was rereleased in 1995 as Polydor 527 760-2.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Marsh, *Before*, p.380.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in Wilkerson, *Who*, p.114.

going on'. While some of these musical and cultural developments were 'fantastic', Townshend had, in song-writing terms, 'run out of steam',

but I felt that if we could achieve anything, if I could achieve anything, if it had a spiritual subtext it would straddle the world of pop from which we'd come and this new hippy world that seemed to be about 'New Age' values.<sup>26</sup>

Townshend's embrace of Meher Baba's 'New Age' mysticism inspired the central thematic concept of the *Tommy* story, namely

the idea of different states of consciousness. The premise was that we had our five senses but were blind to Reality and Infinity. 'There was a parallel within the shape of the autistic child', explained Townshend, so that the hero had to be deaf, dumb and blind so that seen from our already limited point of view, his limitations would be symbolic of our own'.<sup>27</sup>

Tommy's endurance of and emergence from his autistic state would, 'quite simply' – at least in the opinion of the composer – 'map out, musically and lyrically, the life of someone from birth to god-realisation'.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, 'one of *Tommy's* purposes was to disseminate the spiritual precepts of Meher Baba'. As expressed through the Sufi's voluminous discourses and their subsequent anthologization, these precepts are either arcane in the extreme or platitudinously aphoristic.<sup>29</sup> It seems very likely that Townshend himself did not fully grasp them – if such obscurantism is graspable at all.<sup>30</sup> Detailed examination of the teachings of Meher Baba is therefore of much less consequence for an analysis of *Tommy* than investigation of Meher Baba's significance for Townshend during the creation of the album, on which Baba is credited as 'Avatar'.

In the late 1960s, in contrast to his earlier, aggressive Mod persona, Townshend 'positively radiated spiritual vibes', according to his confidant Barnes.<sup>31</sup> He was more than willing to utilize his access to the underground and mainstream media

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<sup>26</sup> 'Pete Townshend talks about *Tommy* with Matt Kent', *Tommy: The Movie* DVD.

<sup>27</sup> Barnes, 'Deaf', *Tommy* CD, p.3.

<sup>28</sup> Townshend, interviewed in *Friends*, number 5, 14/04/1970.

<sup>29</sup> Copious amounts of writings by and about Meher Baba can be accessed through The Avatar Meher Baba website, <http://www.ambppct.org/> (accessed 30/10/2008). See, for example, Meher Baba (edited by Eruch B. Jessawala, J. Flagg Kris and Bal Natu), *Discourses* (7<sup>th</sup> revised edition), (Ahmednagar: Avatar Meher Baba Perpetual Public Charitable Trust, 1987); (Francis Brabazon (ed.), *The Everything and Nothing*, (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (Ahmednagar: Avatar Meher Baba Perpetual Public Charitable Trust, 1989).

<sup>30</sup> Marsh, *Before*, pp.330.

<sup>31</sup> Barnes, 'Deaf', *Tommy* CD, p.3.

to disseminate these 'vibes'. He used his short-lived column in *Melody Maker* during 1970-71 to advertise public meetings of Meher Baba adherents at the London centre he funded.<sup>32</sup> On two occasions he concluded his column with the valediction 'JAI BABA FOLKS!'<sup>33</sup> In 1970, along with other London Baba followers, Townshend contributed to a privately-produced LP called *Happy Birthday* marking the first anniversary of Meher Baba's death.<sup>34</sup> Also in 1970, when given the opportunity to write a piece for *Rolling Stone*, Townshend penned a characteristically verbose article declaring to the rock *cognoscenti* that he was 'In Love With Meher Baba'.<sup>35</sup>

How did Townshend encounter this obscure mystic, and who did he understand him to be? The guitarist had been introduced to Baba's teachings in autumn 1967 by Mike McInnerney, who went on to design the lauded cover of *Tommy*.<sup>36</sup> Feeling that Baba's philosophy was close to that towards which Townshend was grasping, McInnerney presented him with a copy of *The God Man*, a biography of Baba by English drama critic, economist and author C. B. Purdom.<sup>37</sup> What Townshend encountered in *The God Man*,

was shattering. Sure enough, each theory that I had expounded, many to do with reincarnation and its inevitability when considered in the light of the law of averages, were summed up.<sup>38</sup>

Townshend's conversion was swift and profound. Although he never met his guru, the guitarist subsequently claimed that 'one of the first messages' he 'received directly from Meher Baba was that he recognised me' and 'that I was one of his, as it were'.<sup>39</sup> This message was, apparently, received by Townshend

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<sup>32</sup> The Pete Townshend Page, *Melody Maker*, 19/09/1970.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.; *Melody Maker*, 14/04/1971.

<sup>34</sup> Only two thousand copies of this album were pressed. It was distributed privately in the UK, accompanied by a twenty-eight page book, and by mail order in limited numbers in the USA. The music which Townshend contributed to the album included a 'charmingly artless rendition of Cole Porter's "Begin the Beguine"' because 'it was Meher Baba's favourite song'. Geoffrey Giuliano, *Behind Blue Eyes: The Life of Pete Townshend* (New York: Dutton, 1996), pp.118-9.

<sup>35</sup> *Rolling Stone*, number 71, 26/11/1970.

<sup>36</sup> *Amazing Journey*.

<sup>37</sup> Townshend, *Rolling Stone*, number 71, 26/11/1970; C. B. Purdom, *The God-Man: The Life, Journeys and Works of Meher Baba with an Interpretation of His Silence and Spiritual Teaching* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964), The Avatar Meher Baba website, <http://www.ambppct.org/> (accessed 30/08/2008).

<sup>38</sup> *Rolling Stone*, number 71, 26/11/1970.

<sup>39</sup> *Amazing Journey*.

in 1967. Within a year of Baba's death in January 1969, Townshend was proclaiming that 'only one person on this earth is capable of an absolutely perfect love for all and everything, and that is, when earth is fortunate enough to be his illusory host, the Messiah. The Avatar. He just came and went. Meher Baba'.

Baba had been born Merwan Sheriar Irani into a Persian, Zoroastrian family in Poona, India in 1894. As Townshend explained to *Rolling Stone's* readers, while a college student, Irani encountered an elderly female mystic

named Hazrat Babajan, who was in reality a Perfect Master. One day she kissed him on the forehead, and from that moment he was changed. He neither ate nor slept for months, and spent the next seven years in study with the five Perfect Masters of the time. One of these Masters, Upasni Maharaj, threw a stone at Baba, hitting him at the spot where Babajan had kissed him, between his eyes. It was at this moment that Baba became aware of his role and destiny as a Perfect Master himself.

In July 1925, having attracted followers of his own who gave him the name 'Meher Baba', meaning 'compassionate father', Baba ceased to speak; a silence he observed until his death over 44 years later.<sup>40</sup> He made annual visits to America and Europe throughout the 1930s. These stimulated the interest of the Western press. Baba's meeting with Mahatma Gandhi – whom he considered 'not as far advanced' as himself – on board a ship bound for England in 1931 and his feting by Hollywood luminaries Tallulah Bankhead, Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks in 1932, all attracted considerable media attention.<sup>41</sup> Meher Baba's silence was, however, according to Townshend,

of great symbolical meaning. Baba said, 'You have had enough of my words, now is the time to live by them'. He also said that the breaking of his silence would occur before he dropped his body, and that the impact of the word he would speak would bring an incredible surge of spirituality to mankind. In later life, Baba explained that the 'word' he would speak would not be a word in the ordinary sense, but would be in his own Divine language ... The effect of this word on any given individual would depend on that individual's readiness to receive it. The spiritually prepared would get it at full force, receiving a push towards Self-Realization that they couldn't normally achieve even in many incarnations. The unprepared

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<sup>40</sup> *Rolling Stone*, number 71, 26/11/1970.

<sup>41</sup> Purdom, *The God-Man*, pp.77, 81.

would feel nothing, but all mankind would receive an immense spiritual push.<sup>42</sup>

There is no evidence of any such global 'spiritual push' in January 1969, when Meher Baba "'dropped his body'" with the parting statement "'do not forget that I am God"'.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, Townshend 'held that Baba's word has been spoken' and felt he 'hadn't had enough time' to fully prepare: 'to learn to love Baba and hang tightly to his apron strings as the whirlwind of spiritual events around the closing of his manifestation speeded up'.

Besotted though he was, Townshend had become an adherent of a guru with a very limited number of followers. In America, it seemed to Townshend in 1970, 'far and away the most intense area of Baba activity among the young goes on in San Francisco'. Much of the organization of the followers in the city was conducted by 'a guy ... who had met Baba in India called Rick Chapman'. As Townshend points out, however, much of Chapman's activity was dedicated to trying to convert those unaware of Meher Baba, chiefly through dissemination of 'the glut of DON'T WORRY, BE HAPPY cards that you must have seen if you live in San Francisco'.<sup>44</sup> 'Suddenly' according to Geoffrey Giuliano, the Haight-Ashbury district of the city – a West Coast mecca for American hippies and counter-culturalists – 'was flooded with little cards with the guru's smiling face' proclaiming what would become his best-known aphorism.<sup>45</sup> Whether the popularity of this visual and textual message in fact resulted in many spiritual or religious conversions is inevitably unclear.

'In Britain', as Townshend expressed it gingerly in 1970, 'there are fewer Baba lovers. There have been a number of centers [*sic*] in London over the years, but it

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<sup>42</sup> *Rolling Stone*, number 71, 26/11/1970.

<sup>43</sup> Giuliano, *Behind*, p.115.

<sup>44</sup> *Rolling Stone*, number 71, 26/11/1970. The phrase 'Don't Worry, Be Happy' would, when used as the title and hook-line of the 1988 transatlantic hit song by Bobby McFerrin, obtain greater publicity and awareness than the entire teachings of Meher Baba achieved during his lifetime. McFerrin's cheerful hit single – which was, unusually, performed entirely *a cappella* – reached number two in the UK singles charts and number one in the USA. McFerrin had been inspired by a poster of Meher Baba containing his aphorism (truncated from the more overtly deist 'Don't worry, be happy, leave the results to God'). It is doubtful, however, that more than a minority of McFerrin's audience would have been aware of the provenance of the song's title.

<sup>45</sup> Giuliano, *Behind*, p.110.

is only recently that the number of young people becoming interested in Baba indicated a need for a permanent center'. Townshend's first involvement with such a centre involved him giving over his former flat for use by 'Baba lovers'. The second London centre was, by 1970, occupying his wife's former flat in Victoria. The paucity of numbers did not overly concern Townshend, who reminded *Rolling Stone* readers 'that Baba did not come to teach. He came to awaken. He did not come to form a religion, nor organize any cult, creed, sect or movement in his name. He did not take steps to do so'.

Baba had, however, from 1966 onwards, taken steps to dissuade young people from using drugs, particularly hallucinogenics. This was a further source of appeal to Townshend as he worked on *Tommy*. He was particularly taken by what he considered to be one of Meher Baba's 'most powerful and controversial statements: "Drugs are harmful mentally, spiritually and physically"'. Townshend did not know whether he would have accepted this axiom 'had Baba not said it first' but he was adamant, in 1970, that 'the last acid trip I took (on a plane coming back from the Monterey Pop Festival) would have been my last whether I had heard the above from Baba or not'. On the transatlantic flight back from Monterey in the summer of 1967, Townshend ingested a tab of the highly potent and long-lasting psychedelic nicknamed 'STP' (after the brand of motor oil). He experienced the quintessential 'bad trip': 'The effects lasted seven days, and when it finally finished I felt so devastated I resolved never to use drugs again'.<sup>46</sup>

It depended what you meant by drugs. Townshend continued to consume many intoxicating substances, particularly alcohol, in prodigious quantities throughout the 1970s and 1980s, but he did forswear hallucinogenics. He held that there was 'obviously a purpose' for the use of acid and other psychedelics, namely 'the acceleration of spiritual thinking'.<sup>47</sup> 'There was no question' that he had been 'inspired by it', yet

there's a spiritual process going on in every person's head that's so overwhelmingly complex and so beautifully balanced, and acid just feeds on the distortion of that balance. ... The human being is such a beautifully

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<sup>46</sup> *Rolling Stone*, number 71, 26/11/1970.

<sup>47</sup> Cited in *Rolling Stone*, number 37, 12/07/1969.

equipped piece of machinery that it's very spiritually disturbing to topple it and think that it's good.<sup>48</sup>

Richard Barnes has noted that it was within 'two months' of Townshend's decision to abandon hallucinogenics that 'he was into' his new source of spiritual intoxication: Meher Baba.<sup>49</sup> By 1970 this religious conversion was, apparently, irreversible:

I feel that never will I be able to stand back from myself and pretend anymore that God is a myth. That Christ was just another man. That Baba was simply a hypnotic personality. The facts are coming home to me like sledge hammers, not through the words I read in books about Baba, not through even his own words. But through my ordinary daily existence. Meher Baba is the Avatar, God Incarnate on our planet. The Awakener.<sup>50</sup>

The rest of The Who were not impressed. Their response to the spiritual inspiration of *Tommy* mixed tolerance and ridicule. As Giuliano has noted,

Roger Daltrey ... found the whole thing pathetic, running down Townshend's master to his face and referring to him sarcastically as 'Ali Baba'. Keith Moon, too, apparently quite regularly took the piss while John Entwistle characteristically kept quiet, from time to time rolling his eyes skyward in disbelief of his old friend's newest mania.

This 'negativism', of course, 'only served to strengthen Townshend's resolve that he had truly found *the answer*'.<sup>51</sup> Communication of the spiritual ecstasy of Meher Baba's 'answer' through exploration of the formal, musical possibilities to which

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<sup>48</sup> *Amazing Journey*; Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> *Amazing Journey*. Evidence that Meher Baba followers in the United States actively recruited new devotees 'from the drug culture' was published a matter of weeks after the release of *Tommy* in a fascinating article by Thomas Robbins, 'Eastern Mysticism and the Resocialization of Drug Users: The Meher Baba Cult', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Autumn, 1969), pp. 308-317. Robbins, of the Sociology Department of the University of North Carolina, undertook his research through participant observation of Meher Baba groups over several weeks in the locality of his own University at Chapel Hill, North Carolina; in New York, and at the centre of Meher Baba devotion in the USA at Myrtle Beach, North Carolina. Robbins argues, in the abstract of his article, that such 'cults serve as a "half-way house" between the drug culture and re-assimilation into conventional society. Since mystical experiences share elements with drug sensations, the former can operate as a substitute gratification for the latter and facilitate the termination of drug taking'. 'This analysis', he continues, 'is exemplified by a case study of the Meher Baba cult'; not least because 'the writings of Meher Baba contain some elements which are congruent with the "psychedelic" emphasis on inner exploration'. As a result, 'Baba followers tend to shift their emphasis from the passive-contemplative to the active-service oriented aspects of Baba's teachings as their drug experiences recede into the past'.

<sup>50</sup> Townshend, *Rolling Stone*, number 71, 26/11/1970.

<sup>51</sup> Giuliano, *Behind*, p.113. Emphasis in original. Dave Marsh has crystalised the attitudes of the individual band members to the counter-culture in general: 'Townshend was naturally in sympathy with some hippie goals; Daltrey paid them lip service; Entwistle ignored them; Moon actively hated them'. Marsh, *Before*, p.349.

Kit Lambert had exposed him became, for Townshend, the twin *raisons d'être* of *Tommy*.

## 9.2 Text and music

Thus inspired, Townshend led The Who – who were, despite their spiritual misgivings, engaged by the secular potential of the album's concept – into IBC studios to 'experiment in a way that was only really possible for a band like The Beatles'.<sup>52</sup> 'The recording ... took ages and put the group into serious debt. They spent a lot of time in a nearby pub discussing things, leaving the studio empty for long, expensive periods'. Financial constraints necessitated playing gigs for which Moon's only drum kit had to be taken to pieces and moved, adding to technical problems due to the difficulty of maintaining a consistent recorded drum sound. The bills mounted so that the group were, in Townshend's words, by the end of the sessions 'in dire fucking straits'.<sup>53</sup>

Nonetheless, the experimental working ethos prevailed with, as Roger Daltrey has confirmed, the group doing 'as much talking as we did recording'.<sup>54</sup> Early working titles for the piece included '*The Amazing Journey, The Brain Opera, Journey into Space, and Deaf, Dumb and Blind Boy*'. With the more prosaic *Tommy* chosen, the project was repeatedly changed and adapted.<sup>55</sup> The work was recorded out of sequence chiefly because, as John Entwistle later explained, all involved 'had terrible trouble with the story, in fact, at first it just didn't make sense'. This influenced the final format: the work became a double album 'only because Pete had to keep adding bits'.<sup>56</sup> Tensions developed between the group and their producer, with Entwistle 'frustrated at Lambert not allowing too many overdubs'. They feared that Lambert would subsequently overdub additional strings and other instruments: as Townshend has explained, "Kit Lambert wanted to bring in

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<sup>52</sup> Cited in Barnes, 'Deaf', *Tommy* CD, p.5.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.4-5.

<sup>54</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>56</sup> Cited in Wilkerson, *Who*, p.114.



a full orchestra and I fought it all the way”.<sup>57</sup> Since The Who were determined to be able to perform the work live, they wanted their musical line-up of guitar, bass, drums and vocals supplemented by only occasional Hammond organ and piano, played by Townshend, and French Horn, played by John Entwistle.

Entwistle’s French Horn provides much of the melodic top-line for the ‘Overture’ with which *Tommy* – unlike *Hair* and *Godspell* – begins. The first sound the record buyer of 1969 heard was a sixteen-bar introduction. This consists chiefly of block chords on piano, bass and drums which are then broken up, rhythmically, by what Townshend has described as ‘vigorous kind of flamenco’ guitar.<sup>58</sup> These rapid acoustic guitar patterns permeate much of *Tommy* and became one of the stylistic musical tropes with which Townshend is most often associated.

Entwistle’s subsequent horn statement of what later becomes the ‘We’re Not Gonna Take It’ theme of the finale is delivered as a *scherzando* (or playful) fanfare. The Overture then progresses in the long-established convention of operetta and musical theatre: it offers, by way of a musical ‘curtain-raiser’, a three-and-a-half minute instrumental *potpourri* of the key musical themes which will be repeated, developed and varied throughout the subsequent work. This was an audacious manner in which to open a rock album in 1969; one which stated The Who’s intention that *Tommy* should live up to the formal pretensions of its sub-title ‘A Rock Opera’.

The Overture concludes with the first sung statement of the album:

Captain Walker  
Didn’t come home  
His unborn child  
Will never know him.  
Believe him missing  
With a number of men.  
Don’t expect to see him again.

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<sup>57</sup> Barnes, ‘Deaf’, *Tommy* CD, p.5. The author is always struck by the seven-bar passage in the ‘Overture’ beginning at 2 minutes and 50 seconds as an example of thinness in musical texture which hints at potential future over-dubbing. Although this passage merely provides a link to the first, important statement of the ‘Listening To You’ theme on Hammond organ, the complete absence of a top-line or sense of melodic direction hints at possible subsequent supplementation.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3-4.

This passage links to the Nurse's announcement of Tommy Walker's birth:

It's a boy, Mrs. Walker, it's a boy.<sup>59</sup>

Townshend subsequently stated 'how perfectly songs that were written earlier "just fell into place"'; and, indeed, the lyrical and musical theme of 'It's a Boy' - 'the germ of the opera' - was a development of a single, 'Glow Girl', which was recorded in January 1968 but not released at the time.<sup>60</sup>

The following song, '1921', helps to establish the historical context of Tommy's birth. By implication, Tommy, now a young child, was born to a father believed to have been killed in action in the Great War. Tommy's mother's lover expresses his 'feeling' that "21 is going to be a good year, especially' if he and Tommy's mother 'see it in together'. Tommy's absent father suddenly reappears to declaim that

It could be good for me and her,  
But you and her – no, never!

After four bars of insipid linking music, Tommy's mother (although the identity of the character is only apparent by reference to the libretto) sings 'What about the boy?' three times before exclaiming that 'He saw it all!' Mother and father (again only clarified by reference to the libretto) sing to their traumatized son:

You didn't hear it  
You didn't see it  
You won't say nothing to no-one  
Ever in your life ...

Never tell a soul  
What you know is the Truth.<sup>61</sup>

As Richard Barnes has noted, 'the major inciting incident of the plot in "1921" is a mystery. What was it that the boy didn't hear, see and must not tell a soul

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<sup>59</sup> *Tommy* CD Libretto, p.9.

<sup>60</sup> Cited in Barnes, 'Deaf', *Tommy* CD, p.3; *Rolling Stone*, number 37, 12/07/1969. 'Glow Girl' concludes with the same melody as 'It's a Boy' set to the lyrics 'It's a girl, Mrs. Walker, it's a girl'. The song, as Dave Marsh states in the 1995 sleeve-notes of the rereleased *The Who Sell Out* CD on which it was included, 'elliptically describes a woman frantically going through her purse while descending in a plane about to crash'.

<sup>61</sup> *Tommy* CD Libretto, p.9.

about?<sup>62</sup> Only by reference to the accompanying text, which provides the character names, can we deduce that the Lover has been killed by the Father. Nothing in the lyrics or – more significantly, for a work which aspires to be an opera – the musical score hint at any violent confrontation. The mother's lover simply disappears. Tommy, however, so fully internalizes his newly-reunited parents' imperatives that he is rendered deaf, dumb and blind.

The next song, 'Amazing Journey', was the first written specifically for the work.<sup>63</sup> The lyrics were adapted from a lengthy devotional poem by Townshend rooted in the language and imagery of Meher Baba's mysticism.<sup>64</sup> As the unspecified narrator of the song explains, Tommy, now ten years old, is 'in a quiet vibration land. Strange as it seems', however, 'his musical dreams ain't quite so bad': as 'each sensation makes a note in [his] symphony' he is 'loving life and becoming wise in simplicity'. His sensory loss is beneficial, because 'sickness will surely take the mind where minds can't usually go'. Tommy implores those who are able to sense his unspoken message to 'come on the amazing journey and learn all you should know'. He describes what he experiences on this – overtly spiritual – inner voyage:

A vague haze of delirium  
Creeps up on me.  
All at once a tall stranger I suddenly see.  
He's dressed in a silver sparkled  
Glittering gown  
And his golden beard flows  
Nearly down to the ground ...

His eyes are the eyes that  
Transmit all they know.  
Sparkle warm crystalline glances to show  
That he is your leader  
And he is your guide  
On the amazing journey  
Together you'll ride.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Barnes, 'Deaf', *Tommy* CD, p.4.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>64</sup> The poem is reprinted in full in Barnes and Townshend, *The Story*, pp.27-30.

<sup>65</sup> *Tommy* CD Libretto, pp.9-10.

By the end of this song, with the three instrumentalists of The Who confidently into the full-blooded hard-rock mode so beloved by their fans, Tommy seems to have found his spiritual leader; his God.

True to form, however, Townshend's explanation was more opaque: during 'Amazing Journey' Tommy is, in fact, looking at his reflection in the mirror. What he is describing is his 'illusory self' – 'the teacher; life, the way, the path'. It is 'Tommy's real self' which, according to the composer, 'represents the aim – God'. Townshend further explained that 'the play between self and illusory self' was 'one of the central themes of *Tommy*'.<sup>66</sup>

Satisfied that they had succeeded in conveying this esoteric concept through a rock song, Townshend and The Who were inspired: once 'Amazing Journey' was completed 'the project', although it would take eight difficult months to complete, 'seemed to take on a momentum of its own'.<sup>67</sup> The subsequent instrumental 'Sparks', is, according to Townshend, a programmatic piece which conveys that, 'having lost most of his senses, Tommy feels everything simply as rhythms and vibration. Everything reaches him as music'.<sup>68</sup>

Henceforth, the plot in the middle of the album becomes rather clearer. The focus of the songs shifts away from Tommy and towards 'the opportunists and the quacks ... who use him and ... abuse him'.<sup>69</sup> The first of these is The Hawker, a character who sings the blues standard 'Eyesight to the Blind'. The only song in *Tommy* not composed by The Who, 'Eyesight to the Blind' was written and recorded by Sonny Boy Williamson II (1908-1965) in 1951. The Who gave the song a pedestrian arrangement, and its inclusion on the album is somewhat

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<sup>66</sup> Cited in *Rolling Stone*, number 37, 12/07/1969.

<sup>67</sup> Barnes, 'Deaf', *Tommy* CD, p.3.

<sup>68</sup> Cited in *Rolling Stone*, number 37, 12/07/1969. The title of the track echoes those of C.D. Deshmukh, *Sparks of the Truth: from Dissertations of Meher Baba*, (Myrtle Beach: Sheriar Press, 1971) and C. B. Purdom (ed., from selections by Kitty Dave and Delia de Leon), *Sparks from Meher Baba* (Carshalton: The Friends of Meher Baba, 1962), The Avatar Meher Baba website, <http://www.ambppct.org/> (accessed 30/08/2008). 'Sparks' re-uses and considerably develops two melodic and harmonic fragments first heard in the 1967 song 'Rael' on *The Who Sell Out*.

<sup>69</sup> *Oz*, number 21, May-June 1969.

parenthetical. The woman proposed by The Hawker as a potential sexual cure for Tommy must – again, by deduction – be The Acid Queen, who will shortly appear:

Every time she starts to lovin'  
She brings eyesight to the blind ...  
Every time we start to shakin'  
The dumb begin to talk ...  
Just a word from her lips  
And the deaf begin to hear.

Tommy is, however, still a child. To the frustration of his father, as expressed in the song 'Christmas', Tommy cannot share in the joy experienced by other children who 'believe in dreams and all they mean including heaven's generosity'. The Father's concern for his son's spiritual welfare is later contradicted by physical and emotional neglect. At this point, however, his concern is expressed with apparent sincerity:

And Tommy doesn't know what day it is.  
He doesn't know who Jesus was  
Or what praying is.  
How can he be saved  
From the eternal grave?

... how can men who've never seen  
Light be enlightened.  
Only if he's cured  
Will his spirit's future level ever heighten.

The Father pleads with his son:

Tommy, can you hear me?  
How can he be saved?

Tommy replies with a (by implication internalized) eight-bar musical and lyrical mantra which recurs throughout the work:

See me, feel me, touch me, heal me!<sup>70</sup>

His cry for help, or salvation, unheard, Tommy is left at home, alone, with his vicious cousin. 'Cousin Kevin' is the first of John Entwistle's two song-writing contributions to *Tommy*. Both were, as *Oz* magazine's reviewer Graham Charnock predicted on the album's release, amongst 'some of the songs'

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<sup>70</sup> *Tommy* CD Libretto, p.10.

considered 'sick'. Charnock stressed that 'they're not, of course', but found it 'interesting that the two which will probably be the most controversial in this respect, "Cousin Kevin" and "Fiddle About", are both John Entwistle's creations'.<sup>71</sup> Townshend effectively 'commissioned' Entwistle to write these two songs. The guitarist 'didn't want to do them' because

I didn't think I could be cruel enough. They're ruthlessly brilliant songs because they are just as cruel as people can be. I wanted to show that the boy was being dealt with very cruelly and it was because he was being dismissed as a freak.<sup>72</sup>

Entwistle provides, in 'Cousin Kevin', a melodic and harmonic framework which degenerates from the innocent to the grotesque. Likewise, his lyrics juxtapose childhood naïveté with masochistic, extreme violence:

Do you know how to play hide-and-peek?  
To find me it would take you a week.  
But tied to that chair  
You won't go anywhere.  
There's a lot I can do with a freak.

Kevin then speculates, with glee, about holding his cousin underwater in the bath; leaving him outside in the rain until he dies; burning him with cigarettes, and pushing him down the stairs.<sup>73</sup>

'Another route to Tommy's salvation' is offered by the character who introduces herself as 'the Gypsy – the Acid Queen'.<sup>74</sup> She is, by implication, a drug-pushing prostitute who demands payment 'before we start':

If your child ain't all he should be now  
This girl will put him right  
I'll show him what he could be now  
Just give me one night ...<sup>75</sup>

Townshend envisaged The Acid Queen as an archetype embodying all the temptations offered to his generation and class:

The song's not just about acid: it's the whole drug thing, the drink thing, the sex thing, wrapped into one big ball. It's about how you get it laid on you

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<sup>71</sup> *Oz*, number 21, May-June 1969.

<sup>72</sup> Cited in *Rolling Stone*, number 37, 12/07/1969.

<sup>73</sup> *Tommy* CD Libretto, p.10.

<sup>74</sup> Sanders & Dalton, *Rolling Stone*, number 37, 12/07/1969.

<sup>75</sup> *Tommy* CD Libretto, p.11.

that you haven't lived if you haven't fucked 40 birds, taken 60 trips, drunk 14 pints of beer - or whatever. Society - people - force you. She represents this force.<sup>76</sup>

She does elicit a physical response from young Tommy, but this resembles more an epileptic fit – or a bad LSD trip – than an escape from his autistic state:

My work is all done, now look at him  
He's never been more alive.  
His head it shakes, his fingers clutch  
Watch his body writhe.<sup>77</sup>

The subsequent 'Underture' – 'a thumbing-of-the-nose' to the formal intentions stated by the opening 'Overture' – is, at ten minutes duration, the longest instrumental sequence in *Tommy*.<sup>78</sup> Intended to convey the boy's compounding inner turmoil, it further synthesizes and varies many of the melodic and harmonic fragments, themes and riffs which permeate the album, developing particularly upon those first stated in 'Sparks'.

After a short debate between Tommy's parents ('Do You Think It's Alright?') over the wisdom of leaving the child with 'wicked Uncle Ernie', the most malevolent section of the album unfolds in 'Fiddle About', when Ernie sexually abuses Tommy:

Down with the bedclothes,  
Up with the nightshirt ...  
You won't shout as I fiddle about.<sup>79</sup>

John Entwistle again demonstrated his ability to match lyrical content with harmonic and melodic musical form. The short song – delivered in an innocent, dead-pan manner which is all the more grotesque – uses a descending and ascending chromatic melody to convey the threat posed by Uncle Ernie. Daltrey has, rightly, praised Entwistle's 'input', both musical and dramatic, and pointed out that 'the antagonists, like Uncle Ernie initially is, and Cousin Kevin, are just as important as the hero' in the dramatic through-line of the work. Entwistle's contribution of clearly defined characters conveyed in integrated musical and

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<sup>76</sup> Cited in *Rolling Stone*, number 37, 12/07/1969.

<sup>77</sup> *Tommy* CD Libretto, p.11.

<sup>78</sup> *Oz*, number 21, May-June 1969.

<sup>79</sup> *Tommy* CD Libretto, p.14.

lyrical language 'gave the whole thing a balance'.<sup>80</sup> Townshend responded to accusations that 'Fiddle About' was distasteful with the riposte 'that's great!' because 'for the average intelligent person' that was what it was 'meant to be. The kid is having *terrible* things done to him, because that's life as it is'.<sup>81</sup>

BBC Radio 1 disc jockey and *Top of the Pops* television presenter Tony Blackburn applied the term 'distasteful' to the single of *Tommy's* best known song. 'Pinball Wizard' was 'a record that "shouldn't be allowed" on the air'.<sup>82</sup> 'Pinball Wizard' demonstrates the 'curious mixture of sense and serendipity' and the contrast of 'Townshend's intense "control freak" planning ... with spur-of-the-moment whims' which characterized the creation of *Tommy*.<sup>83</sup> The protagonist became a champion of the popular amusement-arcade game because the rock journalist Nick Cohn, then writing reviews for the *New York Times* amongst others, gave a 'lukewarm reception' to a 'rough mix' of the album during its recording.<sup>84</sup> The Who

desperately needed his favourable review, so, on impulse, Townshend, knowing Cohn was a pinball fan, decided that Tommy might play some sort of sport like football or perhaps, even... 'pinball'. 'It'll be a masterpiece,' was Cohn's immediate response. Townshend rushed home and wrote 'Pinball Wizard'. ... 'I thought "Oh, my God this is awful, the most clumsy piece of writing I've ever done ... This sounds like a Music Hall song" ... I was just grabbing at ideas. I knocked a demo together and took it to the studio and everyone loved it'.<sup>85</sup>

Townshend opened the song with a harmonic sequence clearly 'grabbed at' from Henry Purcell. What the guitarist has described as the 'mock Baroque guitar beginning' is, in its use of dissonant suspensions and harmonic resolutions, the clearest example in his song-writing cannon of the influence of Kit Lambert's love of Baroque music. This harmonic pre-amble then gives way to the song's introduction proper, which consists of perhaps the most famous use of a suspended 4<sup>th</sup> chord in rock music history; a Bsus4, resolving to B major. The

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<sup>80</sup> *Amazing Journey*.

<sup>81</sup> Cited in *Rolling Stone*, number 37, 12/07/1969. Emphasis in original.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.; *Melody Maker*, 14/11/1970.

<sup>83</sup> Barnes, 'Deaf', *Tommy* CD, p.3.

<sup>84</sup> Charlesworth and Hanel, *The Who*, p.39; Ibid., p.3.

<sup>85</sup> Barnes, 'Deaf', *Tommy* CD, pp.3-4.



repetition of this simple suspension and resolution is given the same 'vigorous kind of flamenco guitar' treatment used in the 'Overture'. Suspension and resolution create harmonic forward-motion which tips, inevitably, into the sustained 'power chords' (another musical trope of Townshend and The Who) of the tonic key of B major. These, in turn, lead into the song's first verse, as narrated by the Local Lad who is about to lose his position as pinball champion.

Tommy's 'genius as "a pinball wizard" is' of course, as William Mann would observe in *The Times*, 'merely a kind of parable device by Townshend'.<sup>86</sup> The popularity of 'Pinball Wizard', which reached number four in the UK singles chart in March 1969 – and which remains The Who's second most well-known song after 'My Generation', and a 'contender for the best Who song of all time' – would make it easy to suppose that *Tommy* is about pinball.<sup>87</sup> This assumption 'is largely misplaced'.<sup>88</sup> Pinball signified, for Townshend, a 'teenage-like and slightly sleazy' activity: its youthful rebellion was intended to suggest 'something a school teacher would disapprove of'.<sup>89</sup> Kit Lambert and the rest of the band were delighted with the catchy melody underpinned by full-bodied rock which the song brought to *Tommy*, not least because, 'prior to "Pinball Wizard", the whole project was becoming bogged down'. Lambert, in particular, had 'thought it was in danger of becoming "too religious". "Pinball Wizard" made it more Rock Opera than God Opera'.<sup>90</sup>

Characteristically, Townshend intended the song to have several meanings. It is no coincidence that the lyrics describe Tommy's adulatory fans as 'his disciples'.<sup>91</sup> This suggests spiritual and secular adoration like that experienced by the 'rock gods', such as Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix, from the 1960s onwards. Asked to compare worship of the divine with that of the quasi-messianic status accorded to the virtuosic rock stars of his generation, Townshend, in a rare moment of lucid

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<sup>86</sup> *The Times*, 15/12/1970.

<sup>87</sup> Charlesworth and Hanel, *The Who*, p.39.

<sup>88</sup> Barnes, 'Deaf', *Tommy* CD, p.3-4.

<sup>89</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p.3-4.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

<sup>91</sup> *Tommy* CD Libretto, p.14.

self-deprecation, stressed that while “Pinball Wizard” is a very groovy time’, the secular worship it represents

doesn't compare with divinity in any way at all ... I don't happen to be divine at the moment. I can't express the magnificence of divinity in music but I can express the grooviness of being a pinball champ because I'm a pop star which is very close. The absurdity of being a pinball champion!<sup>92</sup>

Tommy's new status as a messiah of the pinball table does not, however, restore his senses. Tommy's father decides, in 'There's a Doctor', to take him to a physician who 'could cure the boy'. The Doctor declares Tommy, in 'Go to the Mirror!' to be 'completely unreceptive'. Tommy repeats his 'See me, feel me' mantra during the dubious medical tests. The Doctor and Tommy's father finally direct him to 'Go to the mirror, boy!'

Tommy's inner thoughts are expressed to the image in the mirror; which, in Townshend's schema, is both Tommy's 'real' self and a representation of deity. What will become the 'circular, looping prayer for unification' of the work's finale is revealed for the first time by Tommy as he addresses both:

Listening to you I get the music  
Gazing at you I get the heat  
Following you I climb the mountain,  
I get excitement at your feet!  
Right behind you I see the millions,  
On you I see the glory  
From you I get opinions  
From you I get the story.<sup>93</sup>

Tommy's mother, in 'Tommy Can You Hear Me?', pleads gently:

Can you feel me near you?  
Tommy can you feel me?  
Can I help to cheer you?

She then, in 'Smash the Mirror', abruptly loses her temper with her unresponsive son:

You don't seem to see me  
But I think you can see yourself.  
How can the mirror affect you?

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<sup>92</sup> Cited in *Rolling Stone*, number 37, 12/07/1969.

<sup>93</sup> Charlesworth and Hanel, *The Who*, p.41; *Ibid.*, p.15.

Can you hear me?  
Or do I surmise  
That you fear me.  
Can you feel my temper  
Rise, rise, rise, rise ...

The ascending chromatic melody of 'rise, rise ...' leads to the final confrontation of mother (who does not appear again on the album) and son:

Do you hear or fear or  
Do I smash the mirror?<sup>94</sup>

Whether the subsequent sound of the mirror smashing is due to Tommy's actions or that of his mother is left ambiguous. Nonetheless, the resulting 'coming together' of Tommy's real and illusory selves are 'what make him aware. They make him see and hear and speak so he becomes a saint who everybody flocks to'.<sup>95</sup> Heralded by an upbeat, optimistic horn fanfare from John Entwistle, Tommy is now fully aware that he is a secular and religious 'Sensation'. As *Rolling Stone* magazine observed, 'the sound of the song is like the Beach Boys', but the euphonic music is matched by euphoric lyrics which suggest 'divinity. Tommy is worshipping himself, knowing what he is and speaking the truth':

You'll feel me coming,  
A new vibration.  
From afar you'll see me.  
I'm a sensation ...

I leave a trail of rooted people  
Mesmerised by just the sight.  
The few I've touched are now disciples.  
Love as One, I am the Light.<sup>96</sup>

The mass media become interested in Tommy's 'Miracle Cure'. In a brief interlude (which echoes the media jingles of *The Who Sell Out*) a Newsboy announces:

Extra! Extra!  
Read all about it.  
Pinball Wizard in a miracle cure!

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<sup>94</sup> *Tommy* CD Libretto, p.15.

<sup>95</sup> Sanders & Dalton, *Rolling Stone*, number 37, 12/07/1969.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*; *Tommy* CD Libretto, pp.15,18.

The song 'Sally Simpson' then recounts, with an air of black humour, how young Sally, a fanatical convert to 'the new Messiah', 'disobeys her parent, heads out to see Tommy perform in concert, gets caught up in a crush in front of the stage and is permanently disfigured as a result'. The song was inspired by an occasion when Townshend observed, from the wings of the stage, a performance by The Doors which culminated in some of Jim Morrison's more fanatical worshippers clashing with security staff. The lilting, whimsical, boogie style of 'Sally Simpson' sounds, as Charlesworth and Hanel have observed, 'as if it belongs on another album entirely', but the lengthy lyrics are central to the plot.<sup>97</sup> Tommy has now become, it seems, a self-contained Trinity of rock icon, pinball champion and religious evangelist:

The theme of the sermon was  
'Come unto me, love will find a way.'  
So Sally decided to ignore her dad  
And sneak out anyway!...

She arrived at six  
And the place was swinging  
To gospel music by nine...

The crowd went crazy  
As Tommy hit the stage! ...  
Sixteen stitches put her right  
And her dad said  
'Don't say I didn't warn yer'.  
Sally got married to a rock musician  
She met in California.  
Tommy always talks about the day  
The disciples all went wild!  
Sally still carries a scar on her cheek  
To remind her of his smile.<sup>98</sup>

Tommy's spiritual rapture increases in 'I'm Free', in which he informs his would-be disciples that 'freedom tastes of reality' and that he is 'waiting for you to follow me'. He offers 'the highest high': a concept derived from Meher Baba which, as Thomas Robbins noted in his 1969 exploration of the link between religious mysticism and drug-use, 'naturally intrigues persons pre-occupied with the

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<sup>97</sup> *Tommy* CD Libretto, p.18; Charlesworth and Hanel, *The Who*, p.40.

<sup>98</sup> *Tommy* CD Libretto, pp.18-19.

cultivation of “highs”<sup>99</sup> In 1970, Townshend explained in *Rolling Stone* why he believed some ‘kids’ sought a (a usually drug-induced) ‘high’, and the means by which they could better achieve it:

One could go on for 50 pages into why kids turn on. Is it society, overcrowding, too much middle class security, threat of atomic war, revolution? It's getting high. That's all. It's what everybody wants. To get a little higher. I think that brings us back to Meher Baba ... Baba says over and over again that the shortest route to God realization is by surrendering one's heart and love to The Master. Of his status he makes no bones. ‘In the world, there are countless Sadhus, Mahatmas, Mahapurushas, Saints, Yogis, and Walis, though the number of genuine ones is very, very limited. I am neither a Mahatma nor a Mahapurush, neither a Sadhu nor a Saint, neither a Yogi nor a Wali. I am the ancient One. The Highest of the High!’<sup>100</sup>

Faith, for Townshend, was now all that was required to reach a state of ecstasy. These Baba-inspired sentiments were most clearly expressed in the lyrics of ‘I’m Free’:

If I told you what it takes  
To reach the highest high  
You’d laugh and say  
‘Nothing’s that simple.’  
But you’ve been told many times before  
Messiah’s pointed to the door  
And no-one had the guts to leave the temple!

In response to The Chorus’ enthusiastic enquiry ‘how can we follow?’ Tommy, in ‘Welcome’, invites them to become ‘one of the comfortable people’ in his ‘house’ where ‘we’re drinking all night, never sleeping.’ All occupations and ages are welcome, including (in what must be a reference to the location of the London Baba centre which Townshend helped to fund) ‘every single person from Victoria Station’. So overwhelming is the response (unlike that of Baba converts to Townshend’s Victoria basement) that Tommy resolves to ‘spare no expense’ in expanding the house into ‘a colourful palace’.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p.19; Robbins, ‘Eastern Mysticism’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Autumn, 1969), p. 311.

<sup>100</sup> *Rolling Stone*, number 71, 26/11/1970.

<sup>101</sup> *Tommy* CD Libretto, pp.19, 21.

Unexpectedly, this transpires in the next song to be ‘Tommy’s Holiday Camp’: a camp of the type visited by so many Britons from the 1930s onwards, and which reached their peak of popularity during the 1950s.<sup>102</sup> Although Townshend wrote the song, it is credited to Keith Moon because it was his ‘inspired idea’ (which would be fully exploited in Ken Russell’s movie screenplay) to set the spiritual centre in a holiday camp.<sup>103</sup> Barnes considers this a welcome ‘antidote to the religious feel’ which is particularly prominent and confusing in the final quarter of the work.<sup>104</sup> Arguably, however, it again suggests the indivisibility, in Townshend’s belief system, of the sacred and the secular. Notwithstanding Kit Lambert’s contribution of a script which helped to clarify the plot – and which, according to The Who’s co-manager Christ Stamp, was, in due course, intended to be filmed as ‘the first Lambert/Stamp production’ – the album was still, months into recording, ‘falling all over the place’.<sup>105</sup> In Townshend’s opinion, it was only in the ‘moment’ that Tommy’s temple is also revealed to be a holiday camp that ‘all of the elements of it come together’.<sup>106</sup>

Tommy’s swift rejection by his followers, which leads abruptly to the album’s conclusion, is another aspect of the story left unsatisfactorily explained. Likewise, it is unclear whether Uncle Ernie, who welcomes all to Tommy’s house, is now forgiven for his earlier sins. What is clear is that Tommy, from the outset of the finale number ‘We’re Not Gonna Take It’, ‘starts to get hard’ with his admirers, or congregation:

If you want to follow me  
You’ve got to play pinball.  
And put in your ear plugs,  
Put on your eye shades  
You know where to put the cork!<sup>107</sup>

He berates those getting drunk (contradicting his recent invitation to enter a house where ‘we’re drinking all night’). He tells those ‘smokin’ mother nature’ that ‘this is

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<sup>102</sup> On the types of activities and entertainments offered in British holiday camps during their 1950s heyday, see, for example, Sandbrook, *Never Had*, pp.132-133.

<sup>103</sup> Townshend, interviewed in *Amazing Journey*.

<sup>104</sup> Barnes, ‘Deaf’, *Tommy* CD, p.4.

<sup>105</sup> Cited in Wilkerson, *Who*, p.114.

<sup>106</sup> Interviewed in *Amazing Journey*.

<sup>107</sup> Townshend, cited in *Rolling Stone*, number 37, 12/07/1969; *Tommy* CD Libretto, p.21.

a bust'. 'Hung up mister normal' is also warned not to 'try to gain my trust'. All are informed that

you ain't gonna follow me  
Any of those ways  
Although you think you must!<sup>108</sup>

The Chorus's response of 'We're not gonna take it ... never did and never will' could, initially, suggest a full acceptance of Tommy and his tenets. As Townshend explained, however, the opposite is the case: the more Tommy 'starts to lay down hard moral facts – like Jesus did' – the more rebellious his erstwhile believers become.<sup>109</sup> They promptly declare that they

Don't want no religion  
And as far as we can tell  
We ain't gonna take you  
Never did and never will ...  
We forsake you!  
Gonna rape you!  
Let's forget you...better still.<sup>110</sup>

As Oz's Graham Charnock noted, this begs several questions: 'is Tommy, by this time, transformed into a seer and prophet, fighting his disciples or leading them?' Moreover, 'who isn't going to take what?' and 'is the cry a revolutionary or a reactionary one?' These questions unanswered, the Chorus depart: by implication, the 'it' they will not take is Tommy's moral and behavioural demands. The protagonist, left alone, reprises his 'see me, feel me' refrain for the last time, perhaps suggesting retreat 'into the realm of pure sensation he knew as a child'.<sup>111</sup> He then concludes the album with what Charlesworth and Hanel have rightly described as the *Tommy* 'hymn'.<sup>112</sup> Seemingly addressed to both God and self – the latter now truly liberated from physical disabilities and psychological dependence on acolytes by the benevolence of the former – 'listening to you I get the music' is left musically unresolved. The compositional choice to repeat to fade – the musical equivalent of a question mark – rather than conclude with the

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<sup>108</sup> *Tommy* CD Libretto, p.21.

<sup>109</sup> Cited in *Rolling Stone*, number 37, 12/07/1969.

<sup>110</sup> *Tommy* CD Libretto, p.22.

<sup>111</sup> *Oz*, number 21, May-June 1969.

<sup>112</sup> Charlesworth and Hanel, *The Who*, p.41.

musical ‘full stop’ of a plagal or perfect cadence is a wise one; musical ambiguity serves to emphasize the many unanswered questions of the album.

The work concludes with the line ‘from you I get the story’. Townshend’s intention was not ironic, but his confidant Barnes has noted that many listeners certainly did not ‘get’ the composer’s story. Yet as he points out, ‘it didn’t matter because you could put your own interpretation on it. Ambiguous song lyrics almost always work better than those where everything is spelt out’.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, Kit Lambert, in later years, ‘boasted’ that it was *Tommy*’s very ambiguity that made it “‘just like grand opera””; an art form in which it is frequently “‘incredibly difficult to follow the story””. Dave Marsh agrees, and makes a convincing case that *Tommy*’s weaknesses, as much as its strengths, place it within the conventions of existing musical theatre:

Music’s deepest, most pertinent advantage over the other arts is its high degree of abstraction. Opera and all of its related forms, from operetta to the Broadway musical, must always compromise between the sense music makes on its own and the more linear logic required by dramatic narrative. Grand opera as a genre long ago decided the question in favor of music; Broadway has never come to a conclusion; operetta relegates everything to the trivialities of story. None of these bastard forms is ever entirely satisfactory, even though any may be glorious in part. In this respect, *Tommy* is nothing if not typical.<sup>114</sup>

There are also novelistic aspects to the album. *Tommy*’s internal journey clearly mirrors Townshend’s own ‘spiritual’ journey towards the ‘enlightenment’ he found through Meher Baba. The inability to articulate emotions and sensations – on the part of both protagonist and author – matched with a dogged determination nevertheless to express those emotions became the subject-matter of the piece. *Tommy* therefore (by accident or design) invites an individualized response from the listener which renders it, at times, more like a novel than a musical drama designed to be received communally.

Mercifully, however, even the acutely verbose and often lugubrious chief composer was at times rendered speechless by the meanings gleaned from the

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<sup>113</sup> Barnes, ‘Deaf’, *Tommy* CD Libretto, p.4.

<sup>114</sup> Marsh, *Before*, pp.329.



work he had created.<sup>115</sup> Addressed thus by an earnest young interviewer on the West German *Beat Club* television programme: ‘There are some elements ... which reflect in a certain sense the phenomenon of youth sub-culture. There is narcissism, there is a kind of new sensibility, there is a strong tendency for playing at things and no more putting it into aggressive forms of counter-action’, Townshend could only muster the response ‘eh [*pause*] yeah’ and a bemused smile.<sup>116</sup> Roger Daltrey, always more matter-of-fact than his bandmate, has been dismissive of those who ascribe to rock music – and *Tommy* in particular – the status of a palimpsest of textual and sub-textual meanings. Daltrey has stated, with a characteristically carefree smile, that ‘rock and roll’s never, ever stood dissecting and inspecting at close range. It just doesn’t stand up. So – shut up!’<sup>117</sup> Such responses did not prevent critics poring over every aspect of *Tommy*. In doing so, many music writers were strongly aware that they were witnessing a paradigm shift towards acceptance of the LP record as a work of art which merited intensive examination. This makes their reviews of *Tommy* particularly worthy of scrutiny.

### 9.3 Critical reaction

In their encyclopedic chronology of The Who’s recording career Chris Charlesworth and Ed Hanel state that ‘it is *Tommy* for which The Who will be remembered above all else, save perhaps for “My Generation”’.<sup>118</sup> The release of the 1969 album provoked similar contemporaneous critical responses. Doubts were raised about the overall coherence of the album and the tastefulness of the subject matter, but there was near-unanimity that The Who had created a work which, for better or worse, represented a turning-point in pop-rock music.

Music magazines on both sides of the Atlantic were, like the British underground press, keen to review at length an album whose record company had invested

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<sup>115</sup> A droll observation about the guitarist by singer-songwriter and artist Patti Smith is rendered all the more astute due to Smith’s own somewhat morose persona: “‘How can somebody like Townshend follow Meher Baba and be such a miserable bastard?’” Cited in Giuliano, *Behinds*, p.220.

<sup>116</sup> Interpolated into *Amazing Journey*.

<sup>117</sup> Cited in the documentary film *The Kids are Alright* (directed by Jeff Stein, 1979).

<sup>118</sup> Charlesworth and Hanel, *The Who*, p.34.

substantial advertising revenue to buy space within their pages. Full page adverts ran, for example, in *Melody Maker* and *International Times* in the run-up to the release of the LP.<sup>119</sup> *IT* also ran another lengthy interview with Townshend, again conducted by Barry Miles. On this occasion, however, it was spread over the two editions of the paper prior to *Tommy*'s arrival in British record shops.<sup>120</sup>

The immediate reaction of *New Musical Express* (the NME) was, however, to label *Tommy* The 'Who's Sick Opera'. Reviewer Richard Green, who 'really was looking forward to this "pop opera," which has occupied Pete Townshend's mind for so long', found the album 'a disappointment, even though I tip it for the NME LP charts'. 'Admittedly', he conceded, 'the idea is original' and the album 'beautifully packaged' but, in his opinion, 'it doesn't come off. Running for over an hour, it goes on and on and isn't totally representative of The Who'. While recognizing that it was, perhaps, 'time for a change in style', Green felt that 'if this is it, I long for a return to the old days'. He concluded that 'pretentious is too strong a word; maybe over-ambitious is the right term but sick certainly does apply. One line goes "Sickness will surely take the mind." It does'.<sup>121</sup> Green was correct, however, in his prediction that *Tommy* would feature in the NME's Top 30 Album Chart: by the week after his negative review the LP had moved up one place to number nine (while the London cast recording of *Hair* remained unmoved from the previous week's number six).<sup>122</sup>

The chart of rival publication *Record Mirror* placed *Tommy* at number two within two weeks of its release.<sup>123</sup> It remained at number two the following week, when *Record Mirror* – which, throughout 1969, boasted on its front page that it was Britain's 'largest selling colour pop weekly' – ran a lengthy but perceptive review by Charlie Gillett. Gillett began by acknowledging that

a rock and roll opera ... seems to be a contradiction in musical conventions: the qualities of rock and roll have seemed to be its

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<sup>119</sup> *Melody Maker*, 07/06/1969; *International Times* number 57, May-June 1969.

<sup>120</sup> *International Times* number 56, 23/05-05/06/1969, and number 58, 13-25/06/1969.

<sup>121</sup> *New Musical Express*, week ending 24/05/1969.

<sup>122</sup> *New Musical Express*, week ending 07/06/1969.

<sup>123</sup> *Record Mirror*, week ending 14/06/1969. The Broadway cast recording of *Hair* held the number one spot in *Record Mirror*'s American LP sales chart that week.

spontaneity, its impact on us through our physical and emotional senses, its unpredictability, and its compactness. Opera has seemed to be planned or contrived, to be directed at our intellect, and to be long-winded.

What, he asked, could have inspired the group which possessed 'in Keith Moon, the best drummer in British pop music, in Pete Townshend the most exciting guitarist and one of the most interesting song-writers, and in Roger Daltrey, an interpretive singer who avoids the usual sorry-for-myself or I'm-tough postures' to 'do opera?' The very idea was, for Gillett, problematic. He identified amongst some of The Who's long-term fans – and particularly 'the venomous writers in some rock and roll fan club magazines' – a growing conviction that 'pop music has been taken over by a bunch of phonies who pay fake homage to real rock and roll and then come up with contrived, pretentious and pointless degradations of it'. *Tommy* was not, Gillett believed, 'bad or insincere enough to justify that kind of criticism, although the intensity of the underground press promotion, and the careful surrealism of the pull-out lyric sheet, inspire cynical wonder'. While accepting that 'we can't blame the group' – or rather 'not completely' – 'for their audience's reaction ... we might, though, wish they hadn't tried to do a rock and roll opera'.

Gillett's criticisms of The Who's foray into the 'opera' format were logically-argued and valid. Rarely amongst critics, Gillett praised the story as 'good', which 'it needs to be' if, as he sagely foresaw, *Tommy* 'will probably come out as a film in a couple of years' time'. The listener can, however 'get the story by reading the lyric sheet'. The central problem, for Gillett, lay in the ambitions of the music, which

isn't – can't be – varied enough. Townshend's guitar is as strong as always, and the drumming is varied – but we can get those sounds on their singles. The singing is what palls fastest – neither the lead singer nor the ... harmonies can keep interest long enough. It's a brave attempt, but hopefully The Who will stick to three minute compositions from now on, and ignore the seductive attention of critics who want to tell them they're artistes.

Gillet argued persuasively that clarion calls for pop-rock musicians to believe and behave as 'artistes' should be ignored:

Of course they are artistes, but somehow they have to ignore this when they make their music. The 'artistic' quality of rock and roll is in its ability to

move us, emotionally and physically, by engaging our surface feelings. If the singer becomes self-conscious about his effect, and the audience worries about his reaction, most of what rock and roll should be is gone. Which should be enough reason for rock and roll composers to leave opera to a different kind of musical culture.<sup>124</sup>

*New Musical Express's* Derek Johnson adopted the opposite position. For Johnson, The Who were productively developing the potential of pop-rock music. The studied, structured nature of *Tommy* was not, for him, the antithesis of the instinctive, emotional pop-rock music ethos. Rather, when reviewing the single release of 'See Me, Feel Me' a year after that of the LP, Johnson offered the prescient opinion that 'posterity will doubtless look back upon The Who's *Tommy* as one of the outstanding landmarks in pop history. And certainly it was one of the first works of its kind to explore the full potential and possibilities of the pop idiom'.<sup>125</sup>

Chris Welch in *Melody Maker* reviewed *Tommy* as his publication's 'Pop LP of the Month'.<sup>126</sup> *Melody Maker* employed, in 1969, a noticeably more serious tone than its competitors. It contained a separate folk-music section, as well as maintaining a considerable space for jazz reviews: a musical genre which had, by 1969, fallen into abeyance amongst most of the other British music papers. For Welch, *Tommy* represented 'a facelift' for music's youngest genre. Townshend had succeeded

in maintaining interest and a high standard throughout the four sides. His story ... has already aroused controversy, but as a serious work it cannot really be accused of being in bad taste except by those who have not listened. The Who's dynamic instrumental power... results in music which covers a wide variety of moods. It can be disturbing, faintly vicious but generally compassionate ... Pete has planned a pop opera of some kind for years, and many others have talked about such a project .... The Who's achievement in creating something worthwhile and valid should be acknowledged as an important facelift to the somewhat battered image of pop.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> *Record Mirror*, week ending 21/06/1969.

<sup>125</sup> *New Musical Express*, ending 17/10/1970.

<sup>126</sup> *Melody Maker*, 07/06/1969. *Melody Maker* later declared *Tommy* 'Album of the Year'. Neill and Kent, *Anyhow*, p.255.

<sup>127</sup> *Melody Maker*, 07/06/1969.

Graham Charnock in *Oz* magazine considered the ambiguities of the LP's plot to be its greatest strength. *Tommy* was, for him, a fable or parable; indeed 'a fantasy for our times'. Charnock expressed relief that 'it's not didactic at all', chiefly because 'there is no overall message. The final track 'We're Not Gonna Take It!' fades out into unresolved ambiguity'. For Charnock, however, 'the answers aren't important'. Rather, 'the open-ending keeps the fantasy alive' and 'gives free rein' to *Tommy's* 'charm'.

Charnock also addressed a debate which had been stimulated by the Radio 1 disc-jockey John Peel; an 'otherwise sensible fellow', who had 'already been trapped into making "better than" comparisons' between *Tommy* and The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper*. Charnock considered this 'a pity, since while *Tommy* is probably an equally important LP and an equally important "event" in the pop music world, the two are really incomparable in terms of the quality of what they attempt and achieve as music'. Part of the cultural impact of *Sgt. Pepper*, Charnock continued, came because it 'stood so obviously outside the existing pop tradition'; and, moreover, 'so obviously apart ... from anything The Beatles had tried before'. *Sgt. Pepper* was

truly revolutionary music. It was so *unexpected* it made your head sing. At the same time it had an integrity which ensured its success not only as an event but as music in its own right. *Tommy* has that same integrity, but in a sense it is nothing new. There is really nothing here that The Who haven't done before and there are, literally echoes ... a certain chord sequence, bass riff or melody line ... that link the present songs with previous ones. On the other hand one can honestly say there is nothing that they've ever done so well. *Tommy* is a natural and, moreover, a triumphant progression from their earlier LPs.

No pop-rock album, Charnock suggests, could ever replicate the impact of *Sgt Pepper*. *Tommy* was, nonetheless, a 'triumph', and one which was

Pete Townshend's as much as anyone's. To produce an opera using the language, music and values of his own generation has been a personal ambition of his for many years now. The opera label then, Townshend's own, is as appropriate as any for *Tommy*. The work has the formal strength and rigidity that the term implies.

Charnock did not, however, detect the self-consciousness which so hindered the album for Gillett. Despite the format of the rock opera genre, Charnock found that

'the music is far from being studied. It's amazing, in fact, that within such a formal framework The Who could have produced songs of such rawness and violence, with such momentum and with such emotional impact as the ones we find here'. The libretto of *Tommy* was also worthy of superlatives, with Townshend's lyrics, which 'always were perceptive, now ... consistently and brilliantly so'. Charnock concluded that *Tommy* was 'a case of the songs achieving a superior level of quality rather than presenting us with anything drastically new in structure'. Charnock recommended the album *in toto*: 'every last thing' about it contributed towards a holistic 'experience' which Charnock felt *Oz* readers should – visually, intellectually and emotionally, as well as aurally – 'try and take in'.<sup>128</sup>

The formal ambition of *Tommy* even attracted attention from *The Times*; attention that was sustained during its various live incarnations. As Townshend has noted, astutely,

for a rock group to receive a critical review in the music section of *The Times* or *The Guardian* used to be considered quite hilarious in 1967. By the group themselves that is; the managers and the record companies realised immediately that although this recognition by the establishment was not going to help the 'street image' of their artistes, it would certainly help with record sales. These always depend on the popularity of a performer with as *wide* a range of people as possible.<sup>129</sup>

For commercial as well as critical reasons, therefore, Lambert would doubtless have been delighted to read in *The Times* that *Tommy* 'was exactly the sort of extended composition which had to be pop music's next achievement. But, although the words are assigned to different characters ... the result on record seems less an opera than a cantata'. This was not, however, a negative feature of the work in the opinion of *The Times*' music critic, William Mann; rather, it allowed him to point out that *Tommy* was, as a result, 'in the tradition of [Igor] Stravinsky's *The Wedding* since the various roles are not sung by separately distinguished singers but by any one or more of The Who's four members'.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> *Oz*, number 21, May-June 1969. Emphasis in original.

<sup>129</sup> 'Introduction by Pete Townshend', Barnes and Townshend, *The Story*, inside front cover. Emphasis in original.

<sup>130</sup> *The Times*, 15 December 1970.

Inevitably there were dissenting critical voices. George Melly, hitherto an admirer of Townshend and The Who, found the album, although 'highly praised', to be 'pretentious in content and not worth a single chorus of "My Generation" in emotional or sociological insight'. Moreover, he considered *Tommy* to be a retrogressive step in the band's musical development and 'a straight throwback to rock. It's as though the heroes of pop's golden age had turned back towards the old certainties. It's as though they were beginning to feel that pop – as pop – had begun to lose its way'.<sup>131</sup> But more typical was the reaction of the transatlantic music press; also, at the time of *Tommy's* release, growing in confidence about the claims to be made for pop-rock music as an art form with a rapidly-developing sense of its own canonicity. San Francisco-based *Rolling Stone* magazine hailed the arrival 'at long last' of the 'opera' which 'Pete Townshend's been talking about doing ... for years'. *Rolling Stone* declared *Tommy* 'probably the most important milestone in pop since Beatlemania. For the first time, a rock group has come up with a full-length cohesive work that could', as *The Times* demonstrated, 'be compared to the classics'.<sup>132</sup>

Pete Townshend has conceded, repeatedly, that *Tommy* is an imperfect work, sometimes lacking logic or musical and lyrical coherence; a work with 'lumps missing, bits of double meaning, of failure'. None of the shortcomings of the 1969 album were, however, due to lack of effort, care or time spent in the studio. As he pointed out in 1970 to the recently-launched underground periodical *Friends*, 'there's not a song there that hasn't been recorded twice, and not one that hasn't been re-written three or four times before it was ever recorded'.<sup>133</sup>

Moreover, Townshend was aware that he was inviting opprobrium from those – within the rock music *milieu* and beyond – who believed that pop-rock musicians should not aspire to produce an extended work with pretensions to the title 'rock opera'. He nonetheless wanted the best of both musical worlds: the immediate,

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<sup>131</sup> Melly, *Revolt Into Style*, pp.133.

<sup>132</sup> Sanders & Dalton, *Rolling Stone*, number 37, 12/07/1969.

<sup>133</sup> *Friends*, number 5, 14/04/1970.

emotional response of rock and roll alongside the more structured and intellectually rewarding elements of 'serious' music. To that end, *Tommy*

was approached in exactly the way anti-intellectual rock people would hate. We went into it in depth before we worked out the plot; we worked out the sociological implications, the religious implications, the rock implications. We made sure every bit was solid. When we'd done that we went into the studio, got smashed out of our brains and made it. Then we listened, pruned and edited very carefully, then got smashed and did it all again, all the time playing gigs and grooving. And somehow it came out as if we'd done it all in one breath.<sup>134</sup>

That it would continue to develop while The Who performed it live – something which The Beatles never had the opportunity or inclination to do with *Sgt. Pepper* or any of their subsequent albums – meant that *Tommy* enjoyed an extended existence on film and on the theatrical stage. The band's resistance to using additional musicians on the original album therefore turned out to be something of a master-stroke. As Barnes noted on the album's re-release in 1996,

the rather thin sound of much of the original album helps, rather than hinders, the success of the work. Had it been souped up and strengthened with multi overdubs, violins, cellos, harps, backing voices, heavenly choirs and sound effects, not only would it not have been The Who but it would have been impossible for the group to reproduce on stage.<sup>135</sup>

This concurs with Graham Charnock's observation in 1969 that

One particularly nice point is that although there is extensive over-dubbing it is always used, as where Townshend mixes acoustic and electric guitars, to intensify and augment the group's characteristic sound rather than transform it into something else. It shouldn't be too difficult, in short, for the Who to perform the entire opera live and one looks forward to them doing just that.<sup>136</sup>

As the next chapter will address, this was what the band immediately did, prodigiously and to widespread acclaim. They also contributed, collectively and individually, to early attempts to stage the piece and to Ken Russell's movie before *The Who's Tommy* became a late addition to the canon of Broadway and West End Rock Operas.

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<sup>134</sup> Cited in *Rolling Stone*, number 37, 12/07/1969.

<sup>135</sup> Barnes, 'Deaf', *Tommy* CD, p.5.

<sup>136</sup> *Oz*, number 21, May-June 1969.



## CHAPTER TEN

### *Tommy* live, on film and on the theatrical stage

#### 10.1 *Tommy* live: the birth of 'stadium rock'

The *Tommy* album formed a nodal point in the history The Who, both as a record that continued to sell steadily in subsequent decades and as the central text for an extraordinary series of concerts and tours. This chapter considers the consequences of those record sales and live performances for the band, the genre of rock, and the global music industry. It then addresses *Tommy*'s transformation into the most successful of the four Rock Opera films and the development from small-scale dramatizations of the piece into a large, commercial staging.

The Who toured *Tommy* for two very intense years from the moment of its release. Using 'the most powerful sound system available' and a 'mesmerising light show', it nonetheless 'seemed remarkable that just two guitars, drums and vocals could deliver this rich, full, varied and fulfilling piece so powerfully'. As '*Tommy* was honed to perfection through these live shows' the band entered 'the peak' of their career in terms of critical and audience response.<sup>1</sup>

The venues for these concerts were striking in their diversity. In the year of *Tommy*'s release The Who were still contractually committed to the small municipal venues which had formed the backbone of the touring circuit since the late 1950s. 'The first extended airing of *Tommy* material before an audience' took place, for example, on 25 April 1969 at Strathclyde University in Glasgow. The following night The Who played at the Community Centre of the Ayrshire mining village of Auchinleck.<sup>2</sup> The band promptly and audaciously moved, however, into some of the world's most prestigious opera houses. They also played *Tommy* at the most significant rock festivals of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The logistical and economic advances attendant upon this shift in the scale of live performance

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<sup>1</sup> Barnes, 'Deaf', *Tommy* CD, p.6.

<sup>2</sup> Neill and Kent, *Anyway*, p.230.

made them 'instrumental in creating the genre of stadium rock', in which bands played in vast, often outdoor arenas.<sup>3</sup>

The band member who had to adjust most to the increasingly large venues was singer Roger Daltrey. As he has put it, 'it was only really ... when we got onstage with *Tommy* as a complete piece of music that I really found my feet and found The Who voice'. Townshend has confirmed that

Roger suddenly became this different kind of singer. He never had that quality that he now has which is of going up to the audience and engaging them and opening his body to them, you know, that kind of nakedness, instead of being a really tight little kind of 'I'm a vicious Mod don't get in my way'.<sup>4</sup>

As Barnes notes, Daltrey was redefining the role of pop singer into that of 'a major rock frontman', who engaged with large audiences through physicality, costume (including long hair), the adoption of a persona and even the use of props, as well as singing. As the 1970s progressed Mick Jagger, Robert Plant of Led Zeppelin and Freddie Mercury of Queen likewise developed into long-haired, carefully-costumed 'frontmen' whose physical gestures and movements became large enough to be read by the huge audiences in the vast stadia in which their bands played. It was Daltrey, however, through his performances of *Tommy*, who established the template for what became expected of a 'stadium rock' singer.

The first large-scale venue at which The Who performed *Tommy* was the Woodstock Festival in New York State on 17 August 1969. Their appearance at the supposed zenith of the American counter-culture was, however, far from happy.<sup>5</sup> Haggles over appearance money; squalid backstage conditions; a fourteen hour delay and the spiking of all available liquids with LSD resulted in what Townshend called a 'pissed off' band taking to the stage at 3.30am. The Who played a 'ragged set' which, for Daltrey, was 'the worst gig we ever played'.

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<sup>3</sup> *Amazing Journey*.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in *Ibid*.

<sup>5</sup> Joel Makower, *Woodstock: The Oral History* (London: Sidgewick & Jackson, 1989), pp127-8, 236-8.

In the middle of that gig, Townshend came to blows with a doyen of the American Counter-Culturalists. As Dave Marsh has described it, the band

were playing 'Pinball Wizard' when Abbie Hoffman, the Yippie *provocateur*, took the stage and seized a microphone. Hoffman was crazed on LSD and had decided that he must make a speech protesting the ten-year sentence of his crony, the Detroit White Panther Party leader John Sinclair, for charges of possessing two joints of marijuana. 'I think this is a pile of shit while John Sinclair rots in prison,' Hoffman shouted into the microphone. That was as far as he got. Townshend put one of his Dr. Marten boots squarely into Hoffman's ass, swatted him with his Gibson SG [guitar] and, as the Yippie fell into the photographers' pit, played on ... Townshend later described kicking Abbie's ass as 'the most political thing I ever did'.<sup>6</sup>

The guitarist would subsequently describe Hoffman as 'politically correct in many ways'. Townshend's anger was, he later claimed, misplaced: it was the organizers of Woodstock who 'really were a bunch of hypocrites claiming a cosmic revolution simply because they took over a field, broke down some fences, imbibed bad acid and then tried to run out without paying the band' while Sinclair 'rotted in jail'.<sup>7</sup> Nearly four decades after the incident, however, Townshend laughed uproariously at the apparent contradiction of his action:

in a sense I was engaged in some kind of sabotage. You know, I was inside this very, very macho group that smashed its guitars and had a reputation for being quite rebellious, trying to spread this message of love and peace!<sup>8</sup>

That message began to be taken into opera houses when The Who played the Amsterdam Concertgebouw on 29 September 1969. Numerous North American gigs followed, before the band performed *Tommy* at the London Coliseum – the 2,500 seat home of the Sadler's Wells (later English National) Opera Company – on 14 December 1969. This performance fulfilled Kit Lambert's ambitions for *Tommy*, and his wider concern with the nature of opera at the time. As Townshend has explained, he and Lambert

had lots of conversations about the hang-ups of opera, all the bullshit about queuing for tickets and the audience who all stood up and cheered together and then clapped before the end because they didn't know the piece enough. Kit hated all this. He wanted to take a group into Covent

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<sup>6</sup> Marsh, *Before*, pp.349-50.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Wilkerson, *Who*, p.127.

<sup>8</sup> *Amazing Journey*.

Garden, shit all over the stage and storm out again. He wanted to do this because he loved the opera and wanted to bring it back to its proper musical level.<sup>9</sup>

Critics in both the underground and mainstream press believed that Lambert had helped to create a work worthy of an operatic stage. Indeed, *Friends'* reviewer felt that '*Tommy* on stage ... comes over as an improvement on the recorded version'; it was 'much more intense' because 'the band, especially Townshend on "Underture" and "Sparks", let themselves get far more into their music'. *Tommy* was now 'seen as one of the best examples of a pop composer's work'.<sup>10</sup> William Mann of *The Times* agreed that

*Tommy* is much more impressive musically as a live performance. The effect is more bold because the group dares more than on the records; but one can see as well as hear their technical accomplishment (no more suspicion that they have built their fame on guts and abandon unsupported by musicianship) and appreciate the harmonic subtleties and moments of compassion.

The choice of the Coliseum as a venue had 'roused' Mann's 'hopes' that *Tommy* 'really could be presented as an opera'. This was not to be: while it formed 'the centre-piece of a most exhilarating concert', Mann observed that

it is still not an opera, nor even a piece of music theatre, except insofar that numerous characters are involved in the unfolding of the story – the words were printed in the programme, as on the L.P., but the house lights were doused so one could not read them.

Notwithstanding his reservations, Mann was impressed with Townshend's compositional achievement: although the 'uncompromising rigour of his up-tempo music' meant that 'sometimes pace does duty for true musical invention', there was 'no suggestion of pot boiling'.<sup>11</sup>

The Who's tour of European opera houses continued throughout January 1970, with appearances in France, Denmark, West Germany and once more in Holland.

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<sup>9</sup> Cited in Marsh, *Before*, pp.223-4.

<sup>10</sup> *Friends*, number 2, 31 January 1970.

<sup>11</sup> *The Times*, 15/12/1970.

Each time, the group 'were given the supreme accolade of being the first rock act ever to appear at each hallowed venue'.<sup>12</sup>

On 14 February 1970 they appeared at the University of Leeds (and played many other British Universities that summer). The Leeds gig resulted in the album *Live at Leeds* which Charlesworth and Hanel have described as 'the best live rock album of its era'.<sup>13</sup> *Times* reviewer Richard Williams agreed. The experience of touring *Tommy* had elevated the band, for Williams, to the status of 'rock aristocracy'. They were

instrumentally ... superb. Townsend himself is one of the most underrated guitarists in rock, eschewing showy quasi-modern effects in favour of a more reticent, more organic style ... John Entwistle's bass guitar underpins the ensemble with lean, highly mobile lines, and Keith Moon's drumming provides the necessary Baroque ornamentation. Moon is an extraordinary stylist .... perhaps the most sophisticated [drummer] in the entire genre, adding a driving rhythmic counterpoint which acts as catalyst to the whole band. Daltrey is a singer of surprising range, able to tackle material of considerable technical and emotional variety while retaining a stance of mock arrogance.<sup>14</sup>

On 7 June 1970 The Who started their 'seventh US tour – and first lucrative one, grossing twice as much as any previous visit' – with two shows at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York City.<sup>15</sup> Moon and Townshend were becoming frustrated with the over-deferential reticence of their audiences in such venues. Moon described the New York performance as "rather like playing to an oil painting", while Townshend found the Metropolitan Opera to be "full of dead ideas, dead people, and too much fucking reverence".<sup>16</sup> *Life* magazine, however, was ecstatic, suggesting that 'rock music may have reached its all-time peak' at the Metropolitan Opera House. In what it called 'a great leap across the gaps of generation, class and culture, the performance' had

installed rock as a maturely rounded art in the shrine of the great European classics. It demonstrated the willingness of the Establishment in its most uptight organisation to cooperate with the youth culture in its most drastic

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<sup>12</sup> Neill and Kent, *Anyway*, p.251-253.

<sup>13</sup> Charlesworth and Hanel, *The Who*, p.45. *Mojo* music magazine concurred four decades later: 'the future for rock as it became ... began right here' with *Live at Leeds*. *Mojo*, January 2011.

<sup>14</sup> *The Times*, 18/05/1970.

<sup>15</sup> Neill and Kent, *Anyway*, p.259.

<sup>16</sup> Giuliano, *Behind*, pp.90-91.

and uncompromising medium. Best of all, it afforded The Who – a great musical organisation long in coming to fame – the opportunity to do brilliantly what no other rock group ever dreamed of doing ... Though the boys used every trick in the book to keep the crowd riveted on them, there was no gimmickry in their music. ... Every song is grasped with authority, charged with energy, performed with flawless ensemble and fascinating solo work. It was just these gifts that forged the 20-odd numbers of *Tommy* into a compelling art work.<sup>17</sup>

The Who then returned to the UK to perform *Tommy* in front of 600,000 people – the band's 'largest-ever audience' and 100,000 more than the estimated number at Woodstock – at the third Isle of Wight Festival on 30 August 1970.<sup>18</sup> They had played *Tommy* on the same bill as Bob Dylan the previous year, and by the 1970 Festival, when they co-headlined with The Doors, the Isle of Wight audience was thoroughly familiar with *Tommy* and responded enthusiastically to the 'Listening To You' finale.<sup>19</sup> As Charlesworth and Hanel have noted, this number, 'with its churning major chords', was proving to be Townshend's most effective piece of music. It repeatedly mesmerized, unified and elevated audiences: 'when it was played live it appeared for all the world as if The Who were paying a remarkable tribute to the audience they were singing to. In this respect, it couldn't fail to lift the spirits'.<sup>20</sup>

In September 1970 the band played their final opera house dates in Europe and concluded eighteen months of solid touring of *Tommy* with further shows at more prosaic UK venues.<sup>21</sup> The financial return on such continuous and high-profile live exposure was life-changing for the band. Within a fortnight of release in America the 1969 album had sold 'more than 200,000 copies and gained The Who their first Gold Record for a million dollars worth of US sales'. On the strength of the New York Metropolitan Opera House performance Decca-Universal rereleased *Tommy*: it promptly sold 'five times' as many as on first release and ushered in what co-manager Chris Stamp has called 'the printing

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<sup>17</sup> Cited in Wilkerson, *Who*, p.138.

<sup>18</sup> Neill and Kent, *Anyway*, p.264.

<sup>19</sup> Barnes, 'Deaf', *Tommy* CD, p.6.

<sup>20</sup> Charlesworth and Hanel, *The Who*, p.41.

<sup>21</sup> Neill and Kent, *Anyway*, pp.265-6.

money era' for the group.<sup>22</sup> The LP also achieved longevity, appearing on the *Billboard* charts for a total of 126 weeks.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, as several informed music critics have noted, in financial as well as artistic terms 'The Who made *Tommy* and *Tommy* made The Who'.<sup>24</sup> The 1969 album 'changed everything for The Who. Previously a 'singles' band, they were now an 'album' band with all the prestige this ... categorisation conferred. Townshend went from being a songwriter to a composer'.<sup>25</sup>

*Tommy's* success had profound consequences not only for the band, however, but also for the entire industry. Townshend has acknowledged that *Tommy* 'liberated' The Who 'financially', but he is uncharacteristically modest in stating that 'suddenly ... we were able to pay our equipment bills overnight, employ a couple of extra road crew, get some stage lights, buy a home'.<sup>26</sup> Simon Frith is more accurate when he cites The Who as 'perhaps the most interesting example of how an entire business can be built out of one group's success'. Frith goes further than Townshend to suggest the logistical investments made possible by *Tommy*:

Their first move was to cut the costs of constant touring by buying, rather than renting, their stage equipment, lights, and transport. Having bought them – and the space to keep them – they began to hire them out to other groups, in order not to waste resources when they were off the road. The Who's roadies thus became experts, selling a service that was increasingly specialized – repairs, electronic advice, stage design, lighting invention; they pioneered the use of lasers and began to manufacture some stage items under license from their American originators. A similar logic saw The Who move from renting rehearsal space to buying it to developing and renting it out as specially designed rock-tour rehearsal space, complete with stage, lighting banks, etc. By the end of the 1970s The Who owned Shepperton, one of Britain's three remaining film studios. They had originally bought a part of it for storage space, then installed video, dubbing, recording, and rehearsal studios, invested in holograph research, and expanded to take over the whole space. They had their own video and film production companies, their own publishing and record production companies – and this had all been achieved by reinvesting their post-*Tommy* earnings.

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.223; Interviewed in *Amazing Journey*.

<sup>23</sup> Charlesworth and Hanel, *The Who*, p.36.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.34.

<sup>25</sup> Barnes, 'Deaf', *Tommy* CD, p.5.

<sup>26</sup> 'Introduction', Barnes and Townshend, *The Story*, inside front cover.

Unlike some bands, the only thing The Who did not invest in at this time was their own record company.<sup>27</sup> In all other aspects they had, by the time of Keith Moon's death in 1978, become amongst the most successful of international rock acts at the same time as the amount spent globally on music exceeded \$4 billion per annum.<sup>28</sup> 'Setting standards for sound and presentation', The Who filled vast stadia and could lay claim to being the 'Greatest Rock and Roll Band in the World'.<sup>29</sup> As Hardy and Laing have noted, however, The Who's work was increasingly subject to guitarist Townshend's more ambitious forward-looking grand designs'.<sup>30</sup>

These 'grand designs' included allowing American record producer Lou Reizner to oversee, in 1972, the orchestration and recording of *Tommy* with the London Symphony Orchestra and an all-star cast of principals. The singers who now gave voice to the different characters included Daltrey; Townshend as Narrator; Entwistle as Cousin Kevin; Maggie Bell and Stevie Winwood as Mother and Father; Richie Havens as The Hawker; Marry Clayton as The Acid Queen; Ringo Starr as Uncle Ernie; Richard Harris as The Doctor, and – in the strongest performance of the recording – Rod Stewart as the Local Lad who sings 'Pinball Wizard'.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the clichéd orchestration by Will Malone and Jim Sullivan, Reizner's double-album, advertised prominently in *Time Out*, sold one million copies worldwide within four months of its release and generated sufficient interest to result in live performances.<sup>32</sup> On 9 December 1972 the extravaganza was presented, with minimal rehearsal and all proceeds given to charity, for two performances at London's Finsbury Park Rainbow.<sup>33</sup> As Starr and Harris were

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<sup>27</sup> Frith, *Sound Effects*, pp.145-146.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp.4-5.

<sup>29</sup> Neill and Kent, *Anyway*, p.247; *The Times*, 09/09/1978.

<sup>30</sup> Phil Hardy and Dave Laing, *The Faber Companion to 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Popular Music* (Suffolk: Faber and Faber, 1990), p.842.

<sup>31</sup> *Tommy, as performed by the London Symphony Orchestra and Chamber Choir with Guest Soloists*, Ode Record Inc., distributed by A & M Records, A & M/Ode SP 99001, 1972.

<sup>32</sup> *Time Out*, no.147, 8-14/12/1972; Neill and Kent, *Anyway*, pp.310, 324.

<sup>33</sup> The Rainbow – a converted cinema – had re-opened in late 1971 under American promoter John Morris with the aim of instigating 'a new era in music presentation in London'. The Who had given the inaugural performance. *Time Out*, No. 90, 5-11/11/1971.



unavailable, the roles of Doctor and Uncle Ernie were filled by Peter Sellars and Keith Moon.<sup>34</sup> Richard Gilbert in *The Times* praised all the principal singers, singling out Bell and Winwood, the ‘Wagnerian dimensions’ of Sellars’ performance, and Moon’s ‘repulsive’ Uncle Ernie for particular praise. ‘Significantly’, however, Gilbert considered that ‘the best singing in this version came from Roger Daltrey’ and found his mind wandering

back to that magic afternoon in 1969 when I heard The Who perform *Tommy* live just before Dylan appeared at the Isle of Wight Festival. The uneven performance and diluted pace of the new *Tommy* serve only as a reminder of the vitality and cohesion of the original.<sup>35</sup>

Riezner planned to present his orchestrated version live in London for charity every Christmas and, like Kit Lambert, harboured ambitions to film the piece: neither would come to pass. The live performance was, however, repeated once more in December 1973. Amongst the audience was film director Ken Russell, watching Daltrey and several more of the returning 1972 cast, alongside *Godspell* alumnus David Essex in place of Townshend as the Narrator.<sup>36</sup>

Russell’s film of *Tommy* was not, however, shot until 1974, in part because Townshend wanted to repeat the success of *Tommy* with a new conceptual work.<sup>37</sup> To that end, he had, in 1971, conceived what can legitimately be described – at least in aspiration – as ‘the first interactive rock show’. Twenty-five years before the global expansion of the internet, Townshend ‘imagined fans connected to the band; the music; the art. The futuristic performance was to be filmed for a movie and called *Lifehouse*’.<sup>38</sup> Frank Dunlop, artistic director of the Young Vic, offered the use of his new, avowedly ‘experimental’ space.<sup>39</sup> Rehearsals began for the three concerts which The Who planned to give using

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<sup>34</sup> Neill and Kent, *Anyway*, pp.293, 313-4.

<sup>35</sup> *The Times*, 11/12/1972.

<sup>36</sup> Neill and Kent, *Anyway*, pp.314, 340.

<sup>37</sup> Barnes, ‘Deaf’, *Tommy* CD, p.6.

<sup>38</sup> *Amazing Journey*.

<sup>39</sup> Dunlop had been the first theatre director to make ‘overtures to Townshend and Kit Lambert about staging *Tommy*’ as the Young Vic’s inaugural production in September 1970. Neill and Kent, *Anyway*, p.277.

state-of-the-art quadraphonic sound.<sup>40</sup> 'Suffice to say', as *The Times* noted in mid-1971, 'it did not work out' and the project was abandoned.<sup>41</sup> The single album *Who's Next*, without any unifying narrative concept, was assembled from the *Lifhouse* material. Daltrey, a central participant, has summed up the problem with *Lifhouse*: 'no-one I've ever met, apart from Pete, ever understood it'. Townshend has recently acknowledged that 'at the time people just thought I was nuts. Behind my back, Kit Lambert was telling everybody that I was insane and that what we were really doing was making a movie of *Tommy* and he was directing it'.<sup>42</sup>

With Townshend still unwilling to sanction a *Tommy* film, The Who addressed their own history in the 1973 double-album *Quadrophenia*, looking back upon the Mod scene of the mid-1960s through the eyes of a young male, Jimmy, who has a 'quadrophenic' (or four-part) personality. 'A more complex project than *Tommy*' – both musically and thematically – *Quadrophenia*, while much lauded by Who aficionados, is 'more flawed'.<sup>43</sup> Despite the skilful brass arrangements (by Entwistle) and Townshend's ground-breaking use of a synthesizer, the album is curiously lacking in dynamic variety. Moreover, the necessity of using pre-recorded tapes to supplement its live performance over-stretched the available technology and made *Quadrophenia* notoriously problematic for The Who to reproduce on stage. A 1979 film of the same title by Franc Roddam used the music and was loosely based upon the (already tenuous) narrative of the 1973 album. Nonetheless, as Richard Barnes has noted, '*Quadrophenia*, though a huge critical success, has not, as yet, equalled *Tommy* in public appreciation'.<sup>44</sup> Townshend continued to produce narrative works such as the concept album *White City: A Novel* and its accompanying film in 1985; none rivalled the critical or commercial success of *Tommy*.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Quadraphonic sound utilized four separate sound channels, rather than the two of stereophonic sound. Quadraphonic – and even more so the experimental 'Quintaphonic sound' pioneered by Townshend in the movie soundtrack of *Tommy*, the only film ever made in Quintaphonic – was the pre-cursor to the various 'Surround Sound' systems which have become increasingly commonplace in the twenty-first century.

<sup>41</sup> *The Times*, 30/07/1971.

<sup>42</sup> Interviewed in *Amazing Journey*.

<sup>43</sup> Hardy and Laing, *Faber Companion*, p.843.

<sup>44</sup> Barnes, 'Deaf', *Tommy* CD, p.6; interviewed in *Amazing Journey*.

<sup>45</sup> Wilkerson, *Who*, p.371-377.

By 1973, while they struggled to overcome the technical problems of presenting *Quadrophenia* live and a 'perceived indifference' to the piece, The Who had dropped *Tommy* as a complete work from their tours and performed only a few songs from it regularly. Notably, 'however, when they reformed for their 1989 tour they not only relented and brought back *Tommy*, but played almost all of it, and, surprisingly, started their set with it'.<sup>46</sup> While the 1969 album retained its place in the rock music cannon on its own merits, the longevity of its popularity was greatly enhanced by its transformation, through the 'memorably flamboyant style' of director Ken Russell, into the most distinctive and imaginative of the four Rock Opera films.<sup>47</sup>

## 10.2 Ken Russell's 1975 film

The filmic potential of *Tommy* had quickly become apparent. Aspiring movie-maker Kit Lambert had, by the end of the recording of the album in 1969, presented a script entitled *Tommy 1914-1984* to The Who: Townshend rejected it. Discussions with director Joseph Strick, who in 1967 filmed James Joyce's *Ulysses*, came to nothing and Townshend's preferred director, Ken Russell, then at the peak of his popularity, was unavailable.<sup>48</sup> Lambert's attempt to pitch *Tommy* to Universal Studios in 1971 alongside Townshend's *Lifehouse* project resulted in neither being made. Instead, finance was finally provided by the Robert Stigwood Organization. As Chapter Eleven will make clear, the movie of *Jesus Christ Superstar* begat that of *Tommy*.

Ken Russell began shooting his own screenplay during 1974 for a 1975 release.<sup>49</sup> The former ballet-dancer had established himself during the 1960s as one of Britain's most visually distinctive film-makers, chiefly through a series of biographical films made for the BBC television arts programme *Monitor*. Working under producer Huw Weldon, and sometimes in collaboration with writer and broadcaster Melvyn Bragg (who penned the screenplay for the film of *Jesus Christ*

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<sup>46</sup> Barnes, 'Deaf', *Tommy* CD, p.6.

<sup>47</sup> *The Times*, 06/07/1978.

<sup>48</sup> *The Times*, 30/07/1971; 'Introduction' by Matt Kent, *Tommy: The Movie* DVD.

<sup>49</sup> *The Times*, 31/07/1973.

*Superstar*). Russell created Expressionist-inspired televisual essays on the lives of Sergei Prokofiev, Edward Elgar, Richard Strauss and Claude Debussy.<sup>50</sup> These were distinctive in their communication of the musical works of the composers in a filmic style which juxtaposed the illustrative with the interpretative; tropes which Russell developed further in his feature films and which reached their apotheosis in *Tommy*.<sup>51</sup> Working from subject matter as diverse as the light, nostalgic musical *The Boyfriend* (by Sandy Wilson, filmed in 1971); the life of composer Gustav Mahler (*Mahler*, 1974, starring Robert Powell), and the frenzied reaction of nineteenth-century audiences to piano virtuoso Franz Liszt (*Lizstomania*, 1975, starring Roger Daltrey as Liszt and Paul Nicholas as Richard Wagner), Russell can legitimately claim to have established an ability to match music and filmic images in a manner which predated the 'music video'.<sup>52</sup>

Russell's other career-long pre-occupation was with religion, its imagery and its misappropriation – particularly in relation to sexual morality. Russell's exploration of sexual relationships and morality in his films *Women in Love* (1969) and *The Music Lovers* (1970) had made him an ideal target for 'those intent upon a resolute assault against a perceived over-liberal trend in public life generally and the arts in particular'.

Opposition to Russell's work was 'exacerbated by press sensationalism' over his 1971 film *The Devils*, starring Oliver Reed and Vanessa Redgrave.<sup>53</sup> Based on historical events in sixteenth-century France, *The Devils* had fallen foul of the Lord Chamberlain when John Whiting dramatized it in 1961 from Aldous Huxley's 1953 novel *The Devils of Loudon*.<sup>54</sup> *The Devils* depicted the moral collapse of a city undermined from within by religious fervour, a treacherous state and sexual jealousy, which climaxed in a rigged trial during which nude nuns ran amok and

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<sup>50</sup> *The South Bank Show: Ken Russell*, London Weekend Television, first broadcast 11/02/2001.

<sup>51</sup> For a scene-by-scene analysis of Russell's feature films up to *Altered States* (1980) see Ken Hanke, *Ken Russell's Films* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1984).

<sup>52</sup> 'Videos' – short promotional films shot on videotape which provided a visual accompaniment to and interpretation of single releases – became ubiquitous within the global pop music industry from the early 1980s onwards.

<sup>53</sup> Anthony Aldgate and James C. Robertson, *Censorship in Theatre and Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp.176-177.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.173-176.

the torturing of an innocent priest, whose execution by fire coincided with the destruction of the city's walls.

Russell intended *The Devils* to be a 'disturbing experience'. He maintained that 'although the events took place over four hundred years ago, corruption and mass brainwashing by Church and State and commerce is still with us, as is the insatiable craving for sex and violence by the general public'.<sup>55</sup> Russell – who considers it 'the only political film I've ever made' – remains profoundly angry that *The Devils* 'was trashed by most people who'd never been to church' or who, unlike the director at the time of the film's creation, 'were not practising Christians'. Its opponents included 'various Bishops' and the evangelical movement the Festival of Light (who will be considered in Chapter Twelve); all of whom Russell claims did not view the film against which they campaigned so vigorously.<sup>56</sup> The British Board of Film Classification awarded it an 'X' certificate (for viewing by over-18s) only after five minutes of footage was excised.<sup>57</sup> Even then it was banned by several local authorities. The reception of *The Devils* was even more of a 'disaster' in America, where the film's own producers, Warner Brothers, 'circumcised twelve minutes off it'.<sup>58</sup> Russell's intended cut of the film has never been given a public release.<sup>59</sup> Sickened by the incomprehension of audiences and critics, *The Devils* 'was the last nail in the coffin' of Russell's Catholic faith; 'a faith that had sustained me for more than ten years and given my life purpose and direction'.<sup>60</sup> His response was a screenplay, entitled *The Angels*, which addressed false religion more overtly. Not surprisingly, given the furore provoked by *The Devils*, he could secure no financial backing to make the film.

For Russell, then, filming *Tommy* held the joint appeal of musical form and the sub-textual rejection of religious idolatry. His screenplay, which alters some key aspects of *Tommy's* narrative and clarifies many more, incorporated elements of

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<sup>55</sup> Ken Russell, *A British Picture: an Autobiography* (London: Heinemann, 1989), pp.193-4.

<sup>56</sup> *The South Bank Show: Ken Russell*.

<sup>57</sup> Aldgate and Robertson, *Censorship*, p.177.

<sup>58</sup> Russell, *British Picture*, p.193.

<sup>59</sup> *Hell on Earth: The Desecration and Resurrection of 'The Devils'*, Channel Four Television, first broadcast 25/11/2002.

<sup>60</sup> Russell, *British Picture*, p.194.

*The Angels*. The influence of Russell – more than a generation older than The Who – upon the development of *Tommy* was therefore almost as profound as that of Kit Lambert and Meher Baba.

Most significantly, Russell shifted the action to the period after 1945. Captain Walker (Robert Powell) is now a Royal Air Force pilot shot down in battle and presumed missing. His wife, munitions-worker Nora, gives birth to the eponymous hero on Victory in Europe (VE) Day, 8 May 1945. The historic period of Tommy's childhood now became one with which the majority in the film's audience (and cast and crew) were personally familiar. The generational dividing-line of VE Day is one about which Townshend felt strongly, but, characteristically, contrarily. He stated, adamantly, that his post-war generation

all had *exactly* the same experience. You know, when you went to granddad and you said 'What do you think made the fucking Germans do that?' you got 'I don't want to talk about it, I don't want to fucking talk about' – you know, 'fuck off'.<sup>61</sup>

Townshend has also, however, described those born before VE Day as 'crows' and those after (such as himself, born on 19 May 1945) as 'finches' who are 'more colourful' and 'less burdened'. 'The suffering of people in the war' such as Tommy's mother

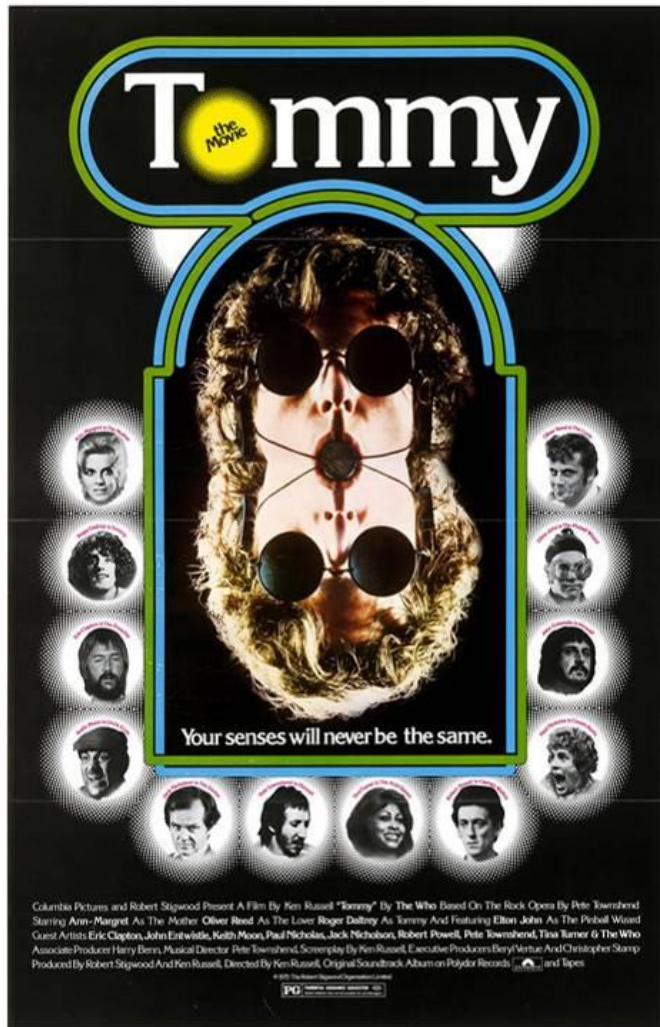
was real. Real bombs had dropped on them ... But my generation, which was born post-VE day, all we got was the party. You know, it was like 'it's all over', and the first four years of my life were just glorious [with] everybody singing and dancing.<sup>62</sup>

Russell revels in the visual opportunities afforded by the decades after the Second World War. The director shows his audience a VE Day street party through the window of the hospital room in which Tommy is born. Russell – and his set designer Paul Dufficey and costume designer Shirley Russell – delighted in the garish holiday-camp setting in which Russell decided that Nora's lover Frank (Oliver Reed) should work. These early holiday camp sequences are, as Townshend has noted 'almost like ... a parody of English life' during the 1950s as post-war austerity gradually gave way to the 'affluent society'. When Tommy

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<sup>61</sup> *Amazing Journey*.

<sup>62</sup> 'Pete Townshend talks about *Tommy* with Matt Kent', *Tommy: The Movie DVD*.



The publicity poster for Ken Russell's 1975 film of *Tommy*.



VE Day celebrations as Tommy is born.



Tommy's mother Nora (Ann-Margret), young Tommy (Barry Winch) and Frank (Oliver Reed).



Nora tends to her adult son (Roger Daltrey).





Nora is engulfed by the products advertised on her television set.



The Pinball Wizard (Elton John) is challenged by Tommy.



The Pinball Wizard, close to defeat, surrounded by (from left to right), John Entwistle, Keith Moon, Roger Daltrey and Pete Townshend.



Eric Clapton as The Preacher who offers 'Eyesight to the Blind'.

reaches the age of 30 in 1975 (and his family exploit his new wealth to live a lavish lifestyle in a traditional English mansion) the film's 'look' becomes highly contemporary and often betrays the influence of Townshend's beloved pop-art. The composer 'loved' the director's 'very, very English' interpretation of Tommy's environment because it enabled Russell to 'solidly locate ... the *Tommy* story, which was a kind of mirror abstract of a whole generation' within 'a quintessentially English film'.<sup>63</sup>

Russell also clarified the crucial inciting incident of the plot. In his movie, it is the lover who kills Tommy's returning father. This even more traumatic event explains more fully Tommy's retreat into an autistic state, and the strained familial dynamic within which he is then brought up. Nora, having already begun a sexual relationship with Frank, is therefore wracked with a lingering guilt; a guilt which partly explains her increasingly wayward and unhinged behaviour as the film progresses.

In the role of Nora, Tommy's mother, Russell's casting of Swedish-American singer and actor Ann-Margret proved an inspired choice. Her fully-supported vocal delivery throughout is extraordinary: like Ted Neeley as Jesus in Norman Jewison's *Jesus Christ Superstar*, she successfully defines an entirely new style of virtuosic rock-opera singing which combines the physical, diaphragmatic technique of musical theatre with the throaty vocal *timbre* of rock. Ann-Margret's willingness to destroy her glamorous persona on screen is also striking. In perhaps the most famous sequence of the film, Nora, surrounded by a life of luxury won by the pinball wizardry of her still unreceptive son, becomes hysterically repulsed by the commercialized world portrayed on her hi-tech television. In a nightmarish inversion of Tommy's cathartic smashing of the mirror, Nora smashes, with a champagne bottle, the television set which then 'vomits out' the very products – washing-powder foam, baked beans and chocolate – which it has been advertising. She then 'rolls in the mess in orgiastic connexion [*sic*] with a phallic pillow'.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> 'Pete Townshend talks about *Tommy*', *Tommy: The Movie* DVD.

<sup>64</sup> *The Times*, 27/03/1975.

Roger Daltrey, who had never acted before, also gives an impressive performance in the difficult title role. Oliver Reed, although a non-singer who 'had to record his vocals line by line and then have them cut together', is convincing as the cynical and threatening 'Uncle' Frank, and he forms a suitably seedy double-act with Keith Moon as Uncle Ernie.<sup>65</sup> Ubiquitous Rock Opera performer Paul Nicholas plays the abusive Cousin Kevin, alongside 'various superstars, like Tina Turner, Elton John and Jack Nicholson' who 'were recruited to bring their own particular talents to the overall interpretation'.<sup>66</sup> Turner plays the drug-addled prostitute The Acid Queen; Nicholson the doctor who extracts a hefty fee from Tommy's spendthrift mother. Pianist-singer John, in the finest musical and visual set-piece of the film, is the Pinball Wizard who battles unsuccessfully with Tommy by playing a pinball machine accessorized with a toy piano keyboard while wearing enormous pop-art boots which elevate him many feet above the frenzied audience.<sup>67</sup> Eric Clapton completes the all-star cast as The Preacher (previously The Hawker) who offers 'Eyesight to the Blind' in his 'faith-healing church filled with Marilyn Monroe masks and icons' at which sacramental whisky and pills are distributed *in lieu* of Eucharistic bread and wine.<sup>68</sup>

Russell was warned against working with rock musicians on the basis of their reputed unreliability, but in fact found them very professional in approach. Russell 'loved doing it' and it 'made money' – despite filming, which began in April 1974, overrunning by several weeks to August, thus increasing the budget from £1 million to £3.5 million.<sup>69</sup> Although not a lover of rock music – indeed, it was the Reizner orchestrated version of *Tommy* which first appealed to him – Russell admired the scale and sincerity of Townshend's ambition and swiftly concluded 'that as a rock opera it is totally unique in the annals of music'.<sup>70</sup> Under Townshend's musical direction, the score had been entirely re-recorded in the three months prior to filming and the work was 'considerably expanded' for the

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<sup>65</sup> 'Introduction by Matt Kent', *Tommy: The Movie* DVD.

<sup>66</sup> Ken Russell, *The Lion Roars: Ken Russell on Film* (London: Hutchinson, 1993), pp.130-131.

<sup>67</sup> Townshend had wanted the blind American pianist and singer Stevie Wonder to play the Pinball Wizard. Wonder's management team were, however, suspicious of Townshend's sincerity. 'Pete Townshend talks about *Tommy*', *Tommy: The Movie* DVD.

<sup>68</sup> *The Times*, 27/03/1975.

<sup>69</sup> *The South Bank Show: Ken Russell*; Neill and Kent, *Anyway*, pp.349, 357.

<sup>70</sup> 'Ken Russell on *Tommy*', *Tommy: The Movie* DVD.

film. Elements of mid-1970s blues and funk invigorated the previously pedestrian arrangements of numbers such as 'The Acid Queen' and 'Eyesight to the Blind'. Many additional players – including Moon's subsequent replacement as drummer in The Who, Kenney Jones – and Townshend's synthesizer expanded considerably the sonic palette of the soundtrack. The result, for Russell, was a valid, new musical genre:

some eggheads turned up their noses at the term 'Rock Opera', but that is what it was, with arias, duets, quartets and choruses. Just like long-haired opera. There were even *leitmotifs à la* Richard Wagner. And it was a good deal more profound than many more pretentious contemporary works by composers like Karlheinz Stockhausen.<sup>71</sup>

Russell also clarified the film's ending. In his version, Tommy's mother, seemingly truly converted – and, indeed, baptized in the sea – by her now spiritually-aware son is, nonetheless, fatally attracted to the commercial trappings of the new religion which Tommy has founded. Frank, keen to cash in on Tommy's status as a new messiah, plots the development of a worldwide network of Tommy Holiday Camps. Tommy's disciples cannot see beyond the consumerist trivia of the new religion: when the associated merchandise and paraphernalia fail to bring them enlightenment they rebel, destroying everything that Nora, Frank and Tommy have created before killing Frank and Nora. Tommy flees across open countryside to return to the Edenic place in which, at the start of the film, we saw him being conceived. His re-baptism in a waterfall and veneration of the rising sun suggest that he has, indeed, at last found a true, unadulterated spiritual state.

*Times* reviewer David Robinson spoke for many critics who, even if not fans of the director, the band or the Rock Opera genre, willingly conceded that, in *Tommy*, the *maestro* had found his *métier*. in 'the demented rock opera by Pete Townshend and The Who, Ken Russell has found his ideal subject'. 'For the first time' in Russell's *oeuvre*, Robinson believed,

the material and the style seem as one ... Russell plays this for all it is worth (and like its creators he may well think that worth greater than it actually is). He exults in images ... [and] responds to the drama of the

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<sup>71</sup> Russell, *The Lion Roars*, pp.130-131.

musical ... Like it or not, there is no question of Russell's prodigal inventiveness, his vitality, his exhilarating indiscretion, his ability to be anything except boring. Mesmerizing, physically stunning, deafening, certainly.<sup>72</sup>

The European premiere at the Odeon Leicester Square – a cinema at which *Tommy* could be presented in Quintaphonic sound – took place on 26 March 1975. Within a week it had taken a house record of £26,978 at the box office. The success of the film was transatlantic: although initially released in only 13 selected US cinemas which had Quintaphonic sound systems, *Tommy* nonetheless grossed more than \$2 million dollars within a month.<sup>73</sup> It spent 14 weeks as the most popular film in Britain and was nominated for three Academy Awards, including Best Actress for Ann-Margaret.<sup>74</sup>

*Tommy* was Ken Russell's last critical and commercial success. His subsequent movies were increasingly badly received. By the 1980s he was, by his own admission, 'unbankable'.<sup>75</sup> Intriguingly, a career lifeline was offered 'sometime in the early 1980s' by Robert Stigwood, Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, who thought Russell could be the ideal director to film *Evita*, but the project foundered on Russell's determination to replace Elaine Paige – the lead in the stage version and Rice's long-term mistress – with a more cinematically attractive actor.<sup>76</sup> By the beginning of the twenty-first century Russell had no British agent, his professional film-making opportunities had dried up and his television work became sporadic. He made occasional cameo appearances as a movie actor in the 1990s, but, by devoting most of his time and energy to making self-edited films shot on video in a converted shed in his garden Russell has, it could be

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<sup>72</sup> *The Times*, 27/03/1975.

<sup>73</sup> Neill and Kent, *Anyway*, pp.369-70.

<sup>74</sup> *Amazing Journey*.

<sup>75</sup> Russell, *British Picture*, p.145.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.211-218. *Evita* was eventually directed by Alan Parker in 1996 with Madonna as Eva and Antonio Banderas as Che. All involved with the attempt to produce a Russell film of *Evita* had agreed that David Essex should reprise his stage performance as Che. The collapse of the project resulted, therefore, in Essex losing out on a role in a Russell film for the third time. As the director's preferred choice for the Pinball Wizard in *Tommy* he had recorded the song with Townshend only to be replaced by Elton John at the insistence of producer Robert Stigwood. A few years earlier Essex, with a verbal agreement with Russell to play the male lead, had worked on dance routines for *The Boyfriend* only to find that 'just before the start date, a ballet dancer was cast instead'. Essex, *A Charmed Life*, p.114.

argued, become an ‘underground’ film-maker in his old age.<sup>77</sup> He remains, however, intensely proud of *Tommy* as much for the opportunity it afforded him to contribute to a new musical genre as for its technical *bravura* and the quality of his screenplay. On its DVD re-release in 2004 he stated that

it is a rock opera, but nevertheless the issues it touches on are quite profound and I think that they’ve become stronger and more prevalent and more in the public eye and people are more affected by religion and commercialism – or bad aspects of it – than even they were in the Seventies.<sup>78</sup>

### 10.3 Coda: *The Who’s Tommy* reaches Broadway and the West End

A high-profile commercial staging of *Tommy* did not come to fruition until twenty-five years after the release of the original album. Townshend did, however, allow several ‘minor exploitations’ of the piece during the 1970s. Whimsical interpretations such as “Electric Tommy”, the music played on synthesizer, and “Marching Tommy” ... scored for college brass bands’ were licensed and as early as 1970 there were small-scale, provincial or student theatre productions.<sup>79</sup> *The Times* praised the ‘originality’ of a mime interpretation of *Tommy* performed by the Oxford University Experimental Theatre Company in late 1970.<sup>80</sup> Quite how the central character’s defining dumbness and rediscovery of voice were conveyed through the medium of mime is not apparent. ‘A multi-media ballet’ interpretation of the *Tommy* LP by the Montreal-based Les Grands Ballets Canadiens played in New York in April and October 1971. A staging with live music was presented by Seattle Opera Company for three weeks in April 1971.<sup>81</sup> Simultaneously, a production at the University of Southern California gained Townshend’s approval. It transferred to Hollywood’s Aquarius Theatre in February 1972 for a four week run.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> *The South Bank Show: Ken Russell.*

<sup>78</sup> ‘Ken Russell on *Tommy*’, *Tommy: The Movie DVD.*

<sup>79</sup> ‘Introduction’, Barnes and Townshend, *The Story*, inside front cover.

<sup>80</sup> *The Times*, 02/01/1971.

<sup>81</sup> Neill and Kent, *Anyway*, p.280.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.300-301.

The first British theatrical dramatization was at the Queen's Theatre in Hornchurch, Essex between 26 April and 20 May 1978 with an extension, due to popular demand, from 13 to 30 June. Starring *Jesus Christ Superstar* alumnus Dana Gillespie, Alan Love 'and a choir of 39 local teenagers', John Hole's production was seen by The Who and won Townshend's blessing for a transfer to the West End's Queen's Theatre for a limited run from 6 February to 14 May 1979.<sup>83</sup>

In 1991, Townshend's inability to play guitar due to a broken wrist led, serendipitously, to him paying closer than usual attention to one request for the rights to *Tommy*, which he granted to the Californian PACE Theatrical Group 'provided that he had a say in the choice of director'. Townshend 'hit it off' with Des McAnuff: the then artistic director of the La Jolla Playhouse, the not-for-profit professional theatre of the University of California's San Diego campus.<sup>84</sup>

Townshend 'played a very active role in ... developing the script, casting [and] over-seeing re-writes and technical aspects of the presentation'.<sup>85</sup> '*The Who's Tommy*, so renamed as a nod to the other surviving members ... was both a critical triumph and the biggest commercial success in the La Jolla Playhouse's ten-year history when it opened there in the summer of 1992'.

On its transfer to the St. James Theater on Broadway on 22 April 1993 the production was very positively reviewed.<sup>86</sup> McAnuff had 'calculated that the teenagers who saw The Who perform *Tommy* at Woodstock in 1969' were 'now middle-aged gentry, too old for rock concerts but still spry enough to be looking for an evening out'. Moreover, the score was 'completely pre-sold'; 'except for one pallid new song ("I Believe My Own Eyes") and numerous reprises of "Pinball Wizard"', the music followed 'the original with scarcely a note out of place'.<sup>87</sup> McAnuff's demographic, commercial and artistic judgements all proved astute:

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<sup>83</sup> *The Times*, 06/07/1978; *BroadwayWorld International Database*, [http://www.broadwayworld.com/shows/Tommy\\_7587.html](http://www.broadwayworld.com/shows/Tommy_7587.html) (accessed 15/01/2010).

<sup>84</sup> Wollman, *The Theater*, p.161.

<sup>85</sup> *The Guardian*, 12/06/1993.

<sup>86</sup> Wollman, *The Theater*, p.161-2.

<sup>87</sup> *The Times*, 27/04/1993.



shortly after opening, *The Who's Tommy* sold \$494,897 worth of tickets in a day – a Broadway record.<sup>88</sup>

Townshend amended the original vague ending; to mixed responses. Although Ken Russell's post-war setting was retained, Townshend reverted to the father killing the lover and concluded the piece with Tommy 'now seen going home, addressing the future through family and home'. The composer believed he had "made Tommy much more responsible for what happens in his own life".<sup>89</sup>

Several critics disagreed, concluding that

the stage version ends more sentimentally than The Who's original ... Not only is Tommy reconciled with a family that includes the alcoholic uncle who sexually assaulted him ... not only does he piously extol the virtues of normality over celebrity; he and the rest of the cast use the closing number to declare how much they can learn from good, plain folks like you and me in the audience.

The 'drive, skill and bustling inventiveness' of McAnuff's production compensated, however, for the 'disingenuous wetness' of the new ending.<sup>90</sup> Michael Coveney was 'unprepared, despite the wild ravings of Frank Rich and John Lahr, for the powerhouse brilliance' of the production which 'neutralizes all the Messianic nonsense, and creates a superb spectacle of moving panels, video screens, pinball iconography and celebrity satire'.<sup>91</sup> Michael Cerveris was widely praised in the title role, and Jamie James noted that 'some of the most sophisticated stage magic money can buy', such as 'psychedelic lighting and audio effects, kaleidoscopic projections and banks of video monitors', were utilized.<sup>92</sup> Such technical brilliance was rewarded with five Tony awards for lighting, design, choreography, direction, and for Townshend's score.<sup>93</sup> James concluded, however, with the astute observation that 'a quarter of a century is an aeon in the world of popular culture' and that 'while Townshend's tuneful, supremely catchy music has held up well, even Who fans will find the piece' – particularly 'the very

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<sup>88</sup> Wollman, *The Theater*, p.162.

<sup>89</sup> *The Guardian*, 12/06/1993.

<sup>90</sup> *The Times*, 06/03/1996.

<sup>91</sup> *The Observer*, 31/06/1994.

<sup>92</sup> *The Times*, 27/04/1993.

<sup>93</sup> *The Guardian*, 12/06/1993.

notion of the hero becoming a pinball wizard' – 'dated'.<sup>94</sup> Given Coveney's reflection that 'the tremendous music is a poignant reminder of how rarely mainstream rock music has thrived in the boulevard theatre' it is perhaps unsurprising that the Broadway production did not attract a new audience sufficient to sustain it past 17 June 1995, when it closed after a run of 899 performances.<sup>95</sup>

A similar fate befell the West End transfer of McAnuff's production to the Shaftesbury Theatre between 20 February 1996 and 22 April 1997. A 'capable supporting cast' including 1980s pop star Kim Wilde as Mrs Walker were led by a 'strong' Tommy, Paul Keating.<sup>96</sup> Ryan Gilbey of *The Independent* spoke for the majority of UK critics when he praised the 'gaudy', 'breathtakingly imaginative', 'rousing', 'outlandish', and 'unmissable' production but damned the 'flimsy conceit' and 'dated ... idiom' of the text itself.<sup>97</sup> *Tommy* was recognized at the 1997 Oliviers, winning the awards for outstanding musical production, best director and best lighting designer. Nevertheless, it proved, ultimately, to be 'a show which the public generally did not warm to in sufficient numbers' – by the time the awards were announced it had already posted notice of closure.<sup>98</sup>

Nonetheless, as Jamie James observed, '*Tommy* was the first evening-length composition by a rock band. It remains one of the most thoughtful and original works in the genre'.<sup>99</sup> In its various incarnations it is, in the words of its chief composer, 'the prime example of Rock and Roll throwing off its three chord musical structure, discarding its attachment to the three minute single' and 'openly taking on ... questions about spirituality and religion'.<sup>100</sup> As a result, The Who, operating 'in their prime' in the late 1960s and early 1970s, 'established ... more

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<sup>94</sup> *The Times*, 27/04/1993.

<sup>95</sup> *The Observer*, 31/06/1994; Wollman, *The Theater*, p.162.

<sup>96</sup> *The Times*, 06/03/1996.

<sup>97</sup> *The Independent*, 07/03/1996.

<sup>98</sup> *The Independent*, 17/02/1997.

<sup>99</sup> *The Times*, 27/04/1993.

<sup>100</sup> 'Introduction', Barnes and Townshend, *The Story*, inside back cover.

than anyone else' the claims of rock music 'to contain elements of a major art form'.<sup>101</sup>

Townshend has, characteristically, sometimes claimed full knowledge of what he was creating and sometimes suggested mystification at *Tommy's* success:

if it's such a silly fucking story, as everybody keeps telling me, if it's so pretentious, if the whole idea of Rock Opera is such a fucking cock-arsed idea, why has it grossed so many millions of dollars, why do people love it so much? I think it's because it has this way of triggering stuff that is deep-seated.

That 'triggering' was, apparently, engendered 'quite disingenuously' by the composer, who believes that *Tommy* was 'accepted because it was like holding up a mirror to an entire generation of people who said yes this is me, this is what I feel and this is what I went through'.<sup>102</sup> As often, however, the analysis of Townshend's 'more plain-speaking' band-mate Roger Daltrey is more accurate. Consciously or not, Daltrey has, with no suggestion of cynicism or irony, placed *Tommy* firmly within the counter-culture's search for a new, if ill-defined, spirituality:

*Tommy* came along at a time in our lives when everyone was searching for answers in their life. The ambiguity of *Tommy* allowed it to answer many things for many different people. But in fact it didn't really answer anything. That was the beauty of it.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Hardy and Laing, *Faber Companion*, p.842.

<sup>102</sup> 'Pete Townshend talks about *Tommy*', *Tommy: The Movie* DVD.

<sup>103</sup> Cited in Giuliano, *Behind*, p.88.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### *Jesus Christ Superstar*

#### 11.1 The 1970 album: origins, text and music

The thesis considered *Hair* as the ‘prototype’ Rock Opera, then *Godspell* as the first staged, scripture-based example, before addressing *Tommy* as an exploration of broadly-defined spirituality through fully-fledged ‘rock’ music. This chapter concludes the four-pronged case study with *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

*Tommy* might be the definitive Rock Opera, but *Superstar* (as it is commonly called by its writers and performers) best merits both halves of the genre’s name. It combines the heavy, blues-inflected rock of the late 1960s and early 1970s with a full orchestra, and makes considerable vocal demands of its cast. It has the most sophisticated, thoroughly developed musical score and the most coherent dramatic narrative; the latter expressed entirely through sung, not spoken, dialogue. *Superstar* is the apotheosis of Rock Opera.

As its librettist Tim Rice has noted, he and composer Andrew Lloyd Webber used the generic term to describe *Superstar* after it ‘had been used by Pete Townshend for *Tommy* and we thought “well ours is a rock opera as well”’. For Rice, ‘the age of “Rock Operas” was *Tommy* and *Superstar*: full stop’. Displaying the affability which differentiates him from Townshend, Rice dismisses any semantic pedantry: *Superstar* is a Rock Opera ‘because it is rock and because it’s an opera’. Anyone else, however, ‘if you want ... can call it a plate of egg and chips – it’s still the same thing’.<sup>1</sup>

This thesis cannot address Rice and Lloyd Webber’s later careers in detail, but it is worth noting that *Superstar* began a sustained period of success for both. Rice produced lyrics for many successful songs and musicals until the end of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Lloyd Webber became one of the world’s most recorded composers, ‘the most ... widely applauded musical theatre figure’ and owner,

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<sup>1</sup> ‘An exclusive interview with master lyricist Tim Rice’, *Jesus Christ Superstar* DVD.

<sup>2</sup> Rice’s autobiography *Oh, What a Circus* is an informative and entertaining source.

through his Really Useful Group, of several theatres in London's West End. By the early twenty-first century, he had achieved worldwide fame across many branches of the entertainment industry.<sup>3</sup> But while Lloyd Webber's score for *Superstar* is considered here, the genesis and form of the work is better understood through the eyes of its librettist, Rice. It is predominantly from that perspective that this chapter considers what made *Superstar*, on its release in 1970 as an LP, Broadway debut in 1971 and arrival in the West End in 1972, distinctive to *Hair* and *Tommy* and complimentary to, but different from, *Godspell*.

Rice and Lloyd Webber met in 1965, when the lyricist was 19 and the composer 17. Both came from relatively well-to-do backgrounds: would-be pop-singer Rice, a student of Lancing College school and, briefly, the University of Paris, 'became a petrol pump attendant and a law student' before joining EMI Records as a 'general dogsbody' to producer Norrie Paramour.<sup>4</sup> Lloyd Webber's mother was a music-teacher, and his father, William, a composer, choir-master and Professor at the Royal College of Music. Andrew, having won a scholarship 'to Westminster School and a History Exhibition to Magdalen College, Oxford', left university after one term for an intensive year studying composition at the Royal College of Music.<sup>5</sup> The young composer was as enthused by pop-rock and 'classical' music as he was enamoured with the theatre, whereas Rice, 'like most people', preferred 'rock music to Broadway music'.<sup>6</sup> As the lyricist has observed, the resulting 'mixture' 'worked rather well'. Bearing in mind the differentiation between 'pop' and 'rock' analyzed earlier, Rice's claim that, prior to *Superstar*, 'nobody had brought *rock* into the theatre' is valid. By offering 'something different', the duo fulfilled the 'golden rule for success: you've got to be good, but you've got to be different as well'.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Coveney, *Cats on a Chandelier: the Andrew Lloyd Webber Story* (London: Hutchison, 1999), p.274. See also John Snelson, *Andrew Lloyd Webber* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Braun (ed.), *Jesus Christ Superstar: The Authorized Version* (London: Pan, 1972), p.6; *The Times*, 13/10/1971; Rice, interview, *Superstar* DVD.

<sup>5</sup> Braun (ed.), *Authorized Version*, p.6.

<sup>6</sup> Rice, *Oh, What*, p.247.

<sup>7</sup> Rice, interview, *Superstar* DVD.

Success was not immediate. After the commercial failure of a few pop singles and early attempts at musical theatre, Rice and Lloyd Webber wrote a short 'pop cantata' based on the Book of Genesis for a London preparatory school. Serendipitously, one pupil's father was Derek Jewell of *The Sunday Times*. His glowing review of *Joseph and The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* ensured that it became popular with schools and was recorded as an LP by Decca records, although the greatly-expanded piece was not staged in the commercial theatre until after the success of *Superstar*.<sup>8</sup> The song-writing duo was taken on by managers David Land and Sefton Myers, who offered them a three-year salary on advance of earnings.<sup>9</sup> Encouraged by the minor success of *Joseph*, including its well-received 1969 performance in London's St. Paul's Cathedral at the invitation of the Dean, the Very Reverend Martin Sullivan, the pair now believed they could write 'entertainingly' on religious subjects.<sup>10</sup> They discussed with Sullivan their idea of a musical based on the life of Christ. Sullivan, convinced of their sincerity, thought the 'choice of theme was exciting'.<sup>11</sup>

The idea was Rice's, and the inspiration two-fold. First, although not a firm believer, his upbringing within the broad culture of Anglicanism had given him, 'since I was about ten, an ambition to one day write a play about either [Pontius] Pilate or Judas [Iscariot] and bring Christ in as an incidental character'. This idea was re-awakened by Bob Dylan's 1964 song 'With God On Our Side' and its, in Rice's opinion, 'all time great lyric',

... Jesus Christ  
Was betrayed by a kiss  
But I can't think for you  
You'll have to decide  
Whether Judas Iscariot  
Had God on his side.<sup>12</sup>

The idea of a rock musical based on Christ's life got a uniform reaction from potential theatrical producers: 'nobody was interested. They said "religion, forget

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<sup>8</sup> Braun (ed.), *Authorized Version*, p.10.

<sup>9</sup> *The Times*, 13/10/1971.

<sup>10</sup> Braun (ed.), *Authorized Version*, p.10; Rice, interview, *Superstar* DVD.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Sullivan, *Watch How You Go* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1975), p.187.

<sup>12</sup> Braun (ed.), *Authorized Version*, p.10.

it, the kids are not interested, terrible idea”’. Rice and Lloyd Webber were diverted into writing *Come Back Richard*, about Richard the Lionheart, ‘which was an enormous flop’. This disappointment – combined with a flash of inspiration from the composer which produced the fanfare opening of what would become the show’s final up-tempo number – strengthened their resolve to create a piece themed around Jesus.

Just as Ragni, Rado and MacDermot’s staging of *Hair* depended on a leap of faith from Joseph Papp, so Rice and Lloyd Webber depended on the commitment of MCA records: ‘the only people who showed any interest’ in financing the recording of the single ‘Superstar’ in late 1969.<sup>13</sup> Singer and actor Murray Head, whom Rice had recorded at EMI, was the voice of Judas, backed by blues-rock singer Joe Cocker’s group The Grease Band. The large ensemble included the gospel-style Trinidad Singers and the City of London Ensemble performing Lloyd Webber’s own orchestral arrangement. The composer noted in 1972 that the single, produced by him and Rice, ‘cost a small fortune ... and I still have memos saying we were off our heads spending that money on a single, but Brian Brolly of MCA backed us all the way’. ‘Superstar’ did not enter the UK single charts on release in November 1969, but it ‘took off’ in Australia, Belgium and Holland. 100,000 copies sold in the USA, where radio exposure convinced Brolly and MCA to finance the recording and release of the entire work.<sup>14</sup> Throughout, Rice and Lloyd Webber had been working towards a theatrical production, not a record, but as ‘a last resort’, the duo accepted that, although no record had ever transferred to the stage, ‘the record might do well enough to get us the show’. With hindsight, Rice realized that ‘doing it on record because no theatre wanted us was the best thing we could have done because it changed the whole nature of the work’.<sup>15</sup>

As it emerged on the ninety-minute double-album released in October 1970, that work was an ‘imaginative re-creation, founded on the Biblical record, of the immediate events leading to the Crucifixion. It uses many rock techniques as well

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<sup>13</sup> Rice, interview, *Superstar* DVD.

<sup>14</sup> Braun (ed.), *Authorized Version*, p.11.

<sup>15</sup> Rice, interview, *Superstar* DVD.

as those of twentieth-century formal composition'.<sup>16</sup> Derek Jewell, who had so admired *Joseph*, provided, in his review of the *Superstar* album, a perceptive analysis of the new perspective on the Passion offered by Rice:

Without in any way injuring the idea and character of Christ as the Son of God which the Bible portrays, Judas is presented far more sympathetically – a realist who had supported Jesus as a liberal reformer, healing and giving to the poor, but who is frightened once his leader begins to act as God, appearing to head up a rebellion against Rome, which Judas believes will cause the occupying power to smash their movement.<sup>17</sup>

Judas, in the first song of the piece, the soliloquy 'Heaven on Their Minds', appeals to Christ the man:

Listen Jesus to the warning I give,  
Please remember that I want us to live.<sup>18</sup>

Judas further protests at Jesus' willingness to be anointed by Mary Magdalene 'because the expensive ointment could have bought food for the starving poor'. His betrayal of Christ is presented, through the logical culmination of his statements and actions, as 'a matter of principle, not of personal gain'.<sup>19</sup>

Rice stressed at the time, and has repeated since, that

*Superstar* doesn't say Jesus was God; it certainly doesn't say he wasn't. It is Jesus seen through the eyes of Judas and Judas didn't believe he was God – or at least I believe Judas didn't believe he was God. And I think that's why Judas felt he had to turn him in because he felt that here was an ordinary man, a man who he, Judas, had admired, who was now getting out of control.<sup>20</sup>

Mary's aria 'I Don't Know How To Love Him' provides one of *Superstar's* most popular melodies and most controversial lyrics. The possibility of lust contained within the song's title is explored by Rice

I don't know how to take this  
I don't see why he moves me  
He's a man, he's just a man  
And I've had so many men before  
In very many ways

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<sup>16</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 18/10/1970. The original double-album was rereleased by MCA UK in 1995 as the double-CD set *Jesus Christ Superstar – A Rock Opera*, MCD 00501 DMCX 501.

<sup>17</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 18/10/1970.

<sup>18</sup> *Jesus Christ Superstar* piano/vocal selections score, (London: Leeds Music, 1970), pp.7-8.

<sup>19</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 18/10/1970.

<sup>20</sup> Rice, interview, *Superstar* DVD.



He's just one more.

The complexity of Mary's conflicting – and recognizably human – emotions are skillfully captured. The concluding verse of the song makes clear, however, that her love for Jesus is predicated upon devotion, not carnality:

Yet if he said he loved me  
I'd be lost I'd be frightened  
I couldn't cope, just couldn't cope  
I'd turn my head, I'd back away  
I wouldn't want to know  
He scares me so  
I want him so  
I love him so.<sup>21</sup>

Such passages led Jewell to declare *Superstar* 'an artistic exercise in musical drama ... every bit as valid (and, to me, often more moving than) Handel's "Messiah" which, similarly, clothed the Christian story in the language, melodic and verbal, of its day'.<sup>22</sup> As the next chapter addresses, the controversy over Rice's portrayal of Jesus, Judas and Mary Magdalene contributed to the profound religious debates which took place around the Rock Operas.

Rice's witty but sparing use of neologisms, along with Lloyd Webber's vocabulary of blues-rock, placed *Superstar* firmly at the cusp of the 1960s and 1970s. As Rice put it, the 'hot new buzz word' 'superstar', as a description of those enjoying global fame, was 'just coming into vogue'. 'It was a title, in 1969, that made you think "bloody hell, I've got to see this or hear this"'.<sup>23</sup> As Patrick Morrow noted in 1973, the concept of global 'superstardom' is, indeed, as central to *Superstar* as it is to *Tommy*.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast to *Tommy*, however, Rice peppers his lyrics with dashes of modish panache, providing welcome verbal variety. The enthusiastic apostles, for example, ask of Jesus early in the piece 'what's the buzz? Tell me what's

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<sup>21</sup> *Superstar* score, pp.32-33.

<sup>22</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 18/10/1970. Harold Hobson would draw identical parallels between *Messiah* and *Godspell* in *The Sunday Times*, 27/02/72.

<sup>23</sup> Rice, interview, *Superstar* DVD.

<sup>24</sup> Patrick Morrow, 'Sgt. Pepper, Hair, & Tommy: Forerunners of the Jesus-Rock Movement', Edward F. Heenan (ed.) *Mystery, Magic and Miracle: Religion in a Post-Aquarian Age* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p.165.

happening'. Jesus berates them for being 'shallow, thick and slow'. The High Priest, Ciaphas, asked by a subordinate 'where do we start with a man who is bigger than John was when John did his baptism thing?' concedes that, in terms of popularity, 'Jesus is cool'. King Herod taunts Jesus: 'I'm sure that you can rock the cynics if you try'. The baying crowd asks, at the moment of Jesus' arrest,

Do you feel that you've had the breaks?  
What would you say were your big mistakes? ...  
You know what your supporters feel  
You'll escape in the final reel.<sup>25</sup>

As Jewell noted, 'Rice has gone further than Handel. He has consciously compounded into the powerful narrative some of the *attitudes* of our day'.<sup>26</sup>

It was not simply the lyrics of *Superstar* that were distinctly 'of our day'. As noted above, Lloyd Webber's score reflects the influence of the gritty blues-rock of contemporary British bands such as Led Zeppelin, Fleetwood Mac and Deep Purple. This is apparent in the prominence of electric guitar melodies and the structuring of songs around a 'riff': a short, repeated harmonic or melodic figure, usually on bass and electric guitar. The opening song 'Heaven on Their Minds', for example, first introduces the one-bar riff around the tonic chord of D minor (but including an Eb 'blue note') which recurs later in the work; most notably when it is repeated *ostinato* with increasing intensity to portray in music the 39 Lashes administered to Christ on the order of Pilate.<sup>27</sup>

As Scott Warfield observes, 'the musical style, although strongly influenced by rock', utilizes 'a sonic palette' ranging 'from nineteenth-century Romanticism to Stravinsky'. The Overture establishes this bold eclecticism. It begins with a solo electric guitar before presenting, in the convention of musical theatre, a medley of the score's principal themes. The difference lies, however, in the 'frequent shifts from rock timbres to synthesised sounds, mixtures of rock and traditional instruments, and ultimately a symphonic finale'.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Superstar* score, pp.10-11, 19, 18, 54, 49.

<sup>26</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 18/10/1970. Emphasis in original.

<sup>27</sup> *Superstar* score, pp.3; 60.

<sup>28</sup> Warfield, 'From *Hair*', *Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, p.238.

Lloyd Webber's skills as an arranger are evident throughout. At a time when someone other than the composer often undertook the orchestration of large-scale musical theatre works, he deployed in his self-penned arrangements a masterful knowledge of the idiomatic resources of electric instruments (including organ and Moog synthesizer) and the symphony orchestra. The ascending flute flourishes which open 'Hosanna' and the bassoon and cello counter-melodies of 'Heaven on Their Minds' and the Motown-influenced 'Simon Zealots', for example, are more skilful and effective than the bland and aimless orchestration of Lou Reizner's version of *Tommy*.

These two examples also demonstrate the composer's use of counterpoint: the combination, often in contrary motion, of two or more rhythmically contrasting but harmonically concordant melodies and counter-melodies. Contrapuntal passages are few in *Hair* and *Godspell*, and very rare in *Tommy*; harmonic progression in the latter being achieved overwhelmingly through 'block chords'. That the last counter-melody to be layered on to the final 'play-out' reprises of 'Superstar' is the same brass fanfare with which 'Simon Zealotes' opens is another example of Lloyd Webber's weaving together, in the style of Classical and Romantic composers, of the various principal themes of the work.<sup>29</sup>

The influence of mid-twentieth century Aleatoricism is demonstrated in the underscoring of the Crucifixion, which forms the dramatic conclusion of the piece (the Resurrection, as in *Godspell*, being omitted). The semi-improvised, 'chance' nature of the music which portrays Christ's death is made more effective by juxtaposition with the lush string arrangement of the epilogue, 'John 19:41'. The title of this orchestral post-script refers to 'the chapter and verse of the fourth Gospel describing the place of Jesus' burial'.<sup>30</sup> Its musical style resembles that of such late Romantics as Gustav Mahler; or, indeed, the full-bodied, tonal orchestral works of Lloyd Webber's father, William.

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<sup>29</sup> *Superstar* score, pp.20, 7-8, 24, 63-64.

<sup>30</sup> Rice, *Oh, What*, p.176.

Irregular metre – again rare in the other Rock Operas – is deployed prominently throughout the piece. ‘The Temple’, for example, is in 7/8, the same time-signature as the middle-eight which punctuates the otherwise steady 4/4 of ‘Heaven on Their Minds’, while ‘Everything’s Alright’ is a waltz in 5/4.<sup>31</sup> The sung-through nature of the piece reflects its ‘operatic’ aspirations, but the composer’s use of recitative most distinguishes it from the other Rock Operas; and, indeed, from the prevailing traditions of musical theatre. Recitative is ‘speech-like singing’ which allows for some freedom of rhythm and pitch in performance. More precisely, such passages in *Superstar* are *recitativo secco* (or ‘dry’ recitative), with ‘merely an accompaniment of “punctuating” chords’.<sup>32</sup> Their use in exchanges between the Priests and, in particular, in the final confrontation between Pilate and Christ reflect the urgency of the lyrics and the heightened nature of events at these points in the narrative.<sup>33</sup> This maintains dramatic momentum within the work as a whole, while also providing greater contrast with more expansive, deliberative arias such as ‘I Only Want To Say (Gethsemane)’.

‘Gethsemane’ is the centre-piece of *Superstar*. While Jewell was correct to highlight the ‘excoriating’ nature of the Crucifixion and the ‘anguish’ of Judas’ suicide, ‘Gethsemane’ is, through its seamless integration of symphonic and rock resources, the most successful and effective ‘Rock Aria’ in the Rock Opera genre.<sup>34</sup> The lengthy number is neither a rock song supplemented with orchestral ‘padding’, nor a traditional musical theatre aria with a rock rhythm section tacked on: both elements are integral to its composition and arrangement.

Lloyd Webber’s music for ‘Gethsemane’ makes wide-ranging demands of the singer, in pitch, dynamics and emotional intensity. Shifts in metre further contribute to the exploration of Rice’s over-arching interest within *Superstar*: ‘Jesus as a man’.<sup>35</sup> This defines the way in which, drawing upon the account in St Luke’s Gospel, Christ expresses his ‘doubts, his eleventh-hour hope that perhaps

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<sup>31</sup> *Superstar* score, pp.29, 6-7, 12-17.

<sup>32</sup> Arthur Jacobs, *The New Penguin Dictionary of Music*, (Harmsworth: Penguin, 1958).

<sup>33</sup> *Superstar* score, pp.18; 59-60.

<sup>34</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 18/10/1970.

<sup>35</sup> Rice, interview, *Superstar* DVD.

he might be excused his horrific destiny'.<sup>36</sup> Rice depicts less the Son of God addressing a supernatural deity and more a human son pleading with his father:

Could you ask as much  
From any other man? ...

If I die what will be my reward? ...  
Why, why should I die?

Petulant rebellion is mingled with sheer terror:

Show me just a little  
Of your omnipresent brain

... Why then am I scared  
To finish what I started  
What you started  
I didn't start it

before 'the beautiful opening ... melody' (which also concludes the show as 'John 19:41') underscores the reverent climax of 'Gethsemane', involving Rice's 'only use of the ancient possessive in *Superstar*' to provide a 'deliberate reference to the Lord's Prayer':

God thy will is hard  
But you hold every card  
I will drink your cup of poison  
Nail me to your cross and break me  
Bleed me, beat me  
Kill me, take me now  
Before I change my mind.<sup>37</sup>

This song, 'Jesus' big moment in *Superstar*, had, in Ian Gillan of Deep Purple, 'an outstanding first interpreter'. Gillan was cast as Christ after Rice heard a pre-release tape of his band's inventive ten-minute rock ballad 'Child in Time'.<sup>38</sup> Gillan's extraordinary, multi-octave rock voice, ranging from lyrical baritone to piercing screams, matched the technical demands of Lloyd Webber's score and helped to define the histrionic, full-voiced vocal style subsequently exemplified by Ted Neeley and Carl Anderson as Jesus and Judas in Norman Jewison's 1973 *Superstar* film, and Ann-Margaret in *Tommy*. The LP also included Murray Head

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<sup>36</sup> Rice, *Oh, What*, p.209.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.209; Rice, interview, *Superstar DVD*; *Superstar* score, pp.40-48.

<sup>38</sup> Rice, *Oh, What*, pp.209, 197.

as Judas and Mike d'Abo, former lead singer with Manfred Mann, as King Herod. Yvonne Elliman, an unknown teenage Japanese-American singer, discovered performing in a club by Lloyd Webber, was cast as Mary Magdalene. London-based American actor/singer Barry Dennen gave perhaps the most three-dimensional performance as a neurotic, over-burdened Pilate. The Grease Band – 'operating in a permanent haze of marijuana from dawn to dusk' – became progressively enthused by the novelty of the work as recording progressed.<sup>39</sup>

The LP was produced by Rice and Lloyd Webber on then state-of-the-art sixteen-track equipment. In its use of recitative and counterpoint; inventive arrangements featuring a range of instrumental and vocal resources; spatial stereo placing of a full cast of different singers, and a clear narrative through-line the *Superstar* record (although based on a well-known story) was indeed novel. It emerged as a cross between a fully-formed through-sung opera, a rock double-album, and a musical radio play; a combination of qualities which make it markedly different from *Tommy*.

The record was advertised extensively in the rock music and underground press.<sup>40</sup> Reviews in the music periodicals and mainstream newspapers were favourable. *New Musical Express*, under the headline 'Superstar Super Album', recognized that 'the risk MCA-UK took was enormous in investing over £20,000 production costs in a virtually unknown work'. It said 'much for the foresight that they did so', however, because the result was 'magnificent'. The NME praised the album for mixing 'classical themes with some hard compelling rock'.<sup>41</sup> For Jewell, the record was 'remarkable'.<sup>42</sup> *Record Mirror* agreed with *The Sunday Times*, describing the music as 'varied' and 'at times ... brilliant'.<sup>43</sup>

The original intention to flesh out *Superstar* with dialogue scenes for the stage was abandoned when the LP became a worldwide hit and, within just over a year

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<sup>39</sup> Rice, *Oh, What*, pp.196-7.

<sup>40</sup> For example, *New Musical Express*, week ending 24/10/1970; *International Times*, number 89, 8-22/10/1970 and number 90, 22/10-5/11/1970.

<sup>41</sup> *New Musical Express*, week ending 07/11/1970.

<sup>42</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 18/10/1970.

<sup>43</sup> *Record Mirror*, 24/10/1970.

of release, the highest-grossing British-made album of all time. Its global take of £13 million by 1971 exceeded that of *Sgt. Pepper*. Sales of 5 million copies of the double-album by 1974 set 'an all-time record for any British disc'. Significantly, however, by 1971 only 40,000 copies had been sold in the UK: it was the two million copies sold in the USA by that year (grossing £10 million) which ensured that *Superstar* opened on Broadway before the West End.<sup>44</sup>

## 11.2 Live in the USA

The financial investment of impresario Robert Stigwood enabled the staging of *Superstar* on both sides of the Atlantic, and the filming of the piece in 1973. Rice and Lloyd Webber had approached Stigwood when casting the album in the hope that some of his roster of high-profile artists would participate. Stigwood declined but, as Rice has observed, 'when the record began to skyrocket in the States, he moved quickly to re-establish contact'. A highly lucrative partnership was formed between Stigwood and Rice and Lloyd Webber's existing management.<sup>45</sup> They sought to stage *Superstar*: first, however, they took action to close down a rash of unauthorized (or 'bootleg') concert performances which mushroomed across North America. Rice and Lloyd Webber were, indeed, deeply concerned that a new Jesus-themed piece called *Godspell* might be another *Superstar* rip-off, and were relieved to discover that the 'modest' show, which they 'enjoyed very much ... bore no resemblance at all to ours'.<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, illegal productions of *Superstar* 'crawled out of the woodwork'. American rock promoters capitalized on demand but proved unwilling to pay royalties to the creators of the work (who also had no quality-control over the numerous concert performances).<sup>47</sup> Stigwood followed through on his threat to 'pursue vigorously' such 'outright pirates' who were infringing copyright.<sup>48</sup>

Oz magazine looked askance at such litigiousness. Unlike The Who's opera about a deaf, dumb and blind pinball messiah, 'the whole idea of doing an opera

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<sup>44</sup> Braun (ed.), *Authorized Version*, p.110; *Jesus Christ Superstar*, London Souvenir Brochure and Libretto, 1974; Warfield, 'From *Hair*', *Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, pp.237.

<sup>45</sup> Rice, *Oh, What*, pp.231-234

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.263.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.243-5.

<sup>48</sup> Braun (ed.), *Authorized Version*, p.95.

called “Jesus Christ Superstar” was, for Oz, ‘deplorable to start with’. ‘Even more degrading’, however, was ‘the undignified squealing from the greedy Robert Stigwood Group and the endless legal suits they’re bringing to try and stop people performing it’.<sup>49</sup> The specific logic of the counter-culture was again apparent: as well as financial gain for himself, Stigwood was also seeking payment for its young creators who were, in 1971, no wealthier than Townshend in 1969. Had a rash of unlicensed *Tommy* tours sprung up across Europe immediately after the release of The Who’s LP, would Oz have denied Townshend’s rights in a similar fashion?

Stigwood prevailed, by not only closing the bootleg shows but also mounting three legitimate US touring companies which sated demand for concert performances prior to a full staging of *Superstar* on Broadway.<sup>50</sup> Stigwood’s investment also enabled the production of the 1973 movie, in which Norman Jewison filmed the piece as a performance given in the contemporary desert of the Holy Land by an itinerant hippy theatre troupe. The movie begins with their arrival and concludes with the image of the crucified Christ against a setting sun as all but he depart. This final image is remarkably similar to that of Tommy’s veneration of the rising sun at the end of Ken Russell’s 1975 film. Robert Stigwood’s successful investment in the *Superstar* movie enabled him to co-produce *Tommy* with Russell and Columbia Pictures.<sup>51</sup> *Superstar* therefore, in its various formats, elevated Stigwood from major rock-music promoter, artiste manager and record company executive to global multi-media mogul.

Rock-music loving Rice, having seen scores of different *Superstar* productions across the world, believes that ‘the work is seen at its best in a rock setting’, preferably, as in Jewison’s film, in an open air or ‘stadium rock’ environment ‘with the full paraphernalia of a rock event, from noise to joints to bewildering lighting and over-the-top effects’ rather than in a conventional theatre space.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Oz, number 38, c.October-November 1971.

<sup>50</sup> Rice, *Oh, What*, p.247.

<sup>51</sup> *The Times*, 31/07/1973.

<sup>52</sup> Rice, *Oh, What*, p.247.



Director Tom O'Horgan brought 'over-the-top effects' aplenty into the conventional space of Broadway's Mark Hellinger Theater, where *Superstar* opened on 12 October 1971. Rice notes that O'Horgan's *Hair* triumph meant 'a very generous deal' from producer Stigwood. The director's trademark exploratory rehearsal techniques were much to the fore. The New York cast, including Elliman as Mary, Dennen as Pilate and Ben Vereen as Judas, 'loved' O'Horgan's 'radical new approach to Broadway'. As opening night approached, 'confidence, not to mention the cast, was high'. This came, in part, from the director's now tried-and-tested 'trust' exercises, including a new one: honey was poured all over Jeff Fenholt, the actor playing Christ, and the cast was encouraged to lick it off, the better 'to "bond with Jesus"'.<sup>53</sup>

The Broadway *Superstar* programme gave O'Horgan billing as prominent as that of the authors. Theatre-goers were told that '*Superstar* represents Tom's longtime dream of directing an opera with adequate rehearsal time'. O'Horgan claimed a prodigious 'operatic background': having written his first opera at the age of twelve he had, 'about eight years ago' (before Ragni and Rado conceived *Hair*, and before the term 'rock' had been coined) begun work on a 'rock opera about the takeover of the national government by homosexuals'. *Superstar* on Broadway was, moreover, described as 'conceived for the stage and directed by Tom O'Horgan'.<sup>54</sup>

The director's confidence was hubristic. *The New York Times* promptly declared that his *Superstar* was 'not an immaculate conception'.<sup>55</sup> Clive Barnes experienced 'disappointment' at the production and *New York* magazine's reviewer wondered if LSD had surreptitiously been administered to all involved.<sup>56</sup> One aspect of the production was widely praised:

As the audience entered, the proscenium was filled with a huge, solid wall. The show began as the wall slowly fell backwards ... and, as it lowered, the cast appeared from behind [it], climbing over the top. When the wall had

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p.253.

<sup>54</sup> *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Broadway Souvenir Programme and Libretto, 1971, Theatre Collection, Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

<sup>55</sup> Cited in Braun (ed.), *Authorized Version*, p.121.

<sup>56</sup> *The Times*, 14/10/1971; Ibid., p.121

lowered far enough, the cast members rushed down the slope straight toward the spectators. The wall touched ground just as the cast reached the front of the stage, and served as the stage floor for the rest of the performance.

Bill Simmer has described the production as 'spectacular': actors flew in or rose from traps, the priests 'floated down to the stage on a large bridge made of bleached bones', and Jesus first appeared

rising out of a huge chalice wearing a vast Lurex robe. The crowds on Palm Sunday, instead of carrying palms, sported translucent, protozoa-type symbols. And there were many different kinds of special effects, including laser beams and smoke and wind machines.<sup>57</sup>

Lloyd Webber detested O'Horgan's 'brash and vulgar' production. His contempt remained undimmed three decades later. The opening of the first musical on Broadway by an 'unknown' 23 year-old British man 'should have been the happiest night of my life'. Instead, he watched 'a mountain of kitsch that looked like a monument to a demented pastry chef'. One of the 'few positive outcomes' of that night was his resolution that 'when I got my first opportunity I would start my own production company'. He remained convinced that 'the biggest selling double-album of all time ran in its first theatre incarnation a mere 20 months' because 'never ... was so wrong a production mounted of my work'.<sup>58</sup>

Rice has been more generous in his retrospective assessment. He 'would love to see an exact replica of [O'Horgan's] production, with all the technical advances' in theatrical staging since 1971, because it was 'beyond doubt ahead of its time, both in its conceit and its actual staging'. While none of the director's subsequent work

made any great impact, through *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* alone he is entitled to be considered an important figure of the twentieth-century musical. These two shows were nothing if not mould-breakers and began the process of dragging Broadway into a new area of music.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Simmer, 'The Theatrical Style of Tom O'Horgan', *Drama Review*, Vol. 21, No.2, p.64.

<sup>58</sup> Andrew Lloyd Webber, introductory programme notes to Gale Edwards' 2000 Broadway revival, <http://www.reallyuseful.com/rug/shows/jesus/inspiration.htm> (accessed 17/03/2008).

<sup>59</sup> Rice, *Oh, What*, p.226.

In 1971, however, the lyricist and composer were in agreement that a new production under a new director was required for London's West End.

### 11.3 *Superstar* in London

As with *Hair* and *Godspell*, by 1972 productions of *Superstar* had opened across the globe, in Copenhagen, Paris, Munster, Stockholm and Sydney. Australian director Jim Sharman's staging provided 'new inspiration for the West End'. Sharman, who had previously directed *Hair* in Sydney, opted, unlike the 'tricksy' O'Horgan, for 'an almost spartan space-age' setting 'of no identifiable time or place'. Rice was delighted that Sharman 'treated *Superstar* with respect' in Sydney, while also creating a 'highly innovative' and 'very un-Broadway' production.<sup>60</sup>

Sharman's London production at the Palace Theatre was different still. The set, by Australian *Superstar* designer Brian Thomson,

was stark and bare; the central playing area a large box with a ... lit floor surrounded by three walls, wide and high, over which members of the chorus clambered throughout the evening. A Piccadilly Circus display of lights flashed up occasional words of information such as 'Jerusalem, Sunday'.

While this 'simplicity' allowed 'the words and music to become the main driving force of the story', for Rice there were 'many moments of great visual impact, primarily through the movements of the swirling chorus, with lights, dry ice, colourful banners and artful choreography'.<sup>61</sup>

One member of the Stage Management team recalls the bridge which dominated the up-stage area; a section of the set so steep that special footwear with rubber soles had to be worn by the actors. In most respects, however, the predominant atmosphere of the Palace production was, with its emphasis on lighting and sound, that of 'a big concert'. Sound technician Francesca Faulkner-Greatorex notes that, with an orchestra of twenty-six in the pit, *Superstar* represented the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp.270-2, 275; *The Times*, 01/06/1974.

<sup>61</sup> Rice, *Oh, What*, pp.280-1.

end of an era for 'pit bands' of such a size; which, by the early 1980s, were no longer economically viable. Moreover, the *Superstar* rhythm section was in addition to those twenty-six. The guitarists, percussionists and keyboard players were, like the much simpler (and cheaper) four-piece rock-band of *Godspell*, placed in full audience view on the stage itself. Investment in sound quality yielded large speakers, rigged across the proscenium. These made possible – in a manner which would have impressed Pete Townshend, and which may still be unique in the history of the West End – full stereo panning.

Sharman's production opened on 9 August 1972 and ran for over eight years, making it the then longest-running musical in West End history. Members of the first cast included the omnipresent Paul Nicholas as Christ, relative unknown Stephen Tate as Judas and Dana Gillespie as Mary. Other notable company members during the lengthy run included Christopher Neil as Judas and Colm Wilkinson as Judas. They had taken over their roles by the time Francesca Faulkner-Greatorex, the young sound-operator of *Godspell*, joined the Palace company in late 1974. She was struck by the 'big' and 'unusual' – although not in *Hair* or the Broadway or film *Superstars* – 'ethnic mix on stage'. Black actors in the 1972 company included Paul Barber and *Hair* alumnus Floella Benjamin.<sup>62</sup>

London's theatre reviewers tended, like Irving Wardle of *The Times*, to give qualified praise to the piece and a warmer reception to the performers and Sharman's production.<sup>63</sup> *Time Out*, like *Oz* before it, was, however, quick to denounce *Superstar*. The vitriolic criticism of the Rock Operas (with the exception of *Tommy*) by the underground press reached a new high:

Jesus Christ is a sullen sob-boy tormented by half-baked existential angst which never quite gets expressed. Mary Magdalene is the sweetest, most innocent thing you ever saw – every time her tragic hero thinks of the dreadful fate to come, she croons gently in his ear ... There's no reformed whore in this interpretation – just a gentle girl-next-door. Judas Iscariot is a repressed boy scout flushed by the first dawns of a political consciousness.

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<sup>62</sup> Faulkner-Greatorex, interview, 26/01/2006.

<sup>63</sup> *The Times*, 10/08/1972.

The set, lighting design and some performers merited praise, but the staging of 'King Herod's Song' was a metaphor for the inherent 'inauthenticity' of the piece.

The 'show-stopping number' was

the one moment in the evening when 'Superstar' looks what it is – a brash, vulgar, fun-loving camped-up romp produced by the middle-aged for the middle-aged with 'youth' – ah, what a lovely word in the box-office! – trapped between the two like the nearest thing we'll ever get to sacred prostitutes in this godless age.<sup>64</sup>

One youth, however, recalls being both entertained and engaged by *Superstar*.

Sue Griffiths, the schoolgirl who had seen *Godspell* in 1972, saw Sharman's production in 1973 'with the same friend': 'spurred on' by their Wyndham's experience, they booked tickets for the Palace 'about six months in advance!' Sue 'enjoyed' *Superstar* 'as much as *Godspell*'. She recognized 'its very different, more distanced and operatic style and more dramatic presentation of the events and personalities' but was excited by the 'very "modern"' nature of the show.<sup>65</sup>

The opinions of audience members like Sue would prove more important than reviews, confirming Milton Shulman's prediction in the *Evening Standard* that *Superstar* would fall into the category of 'theatrical events that are bound to defy the impact of criticism'.<sup>66</sup> This was, in part, because, as Elaine Paige – who spent a 'year of carefree nights' in the chorus – has observed, 'the public already knew the music from the album'. Paige had been enthused by the record when her *Hair* colleague Murray Head had played her a pre-release copy.<sup>67</sup> Francesca Faulkner-Greatorex was likewise inspired to join *Superstar* after being 'very excited' by the 1970 album.<sup>68</sup>

Francesca has noted that the working atmosphere at the Palace resembled more that of *Hair* than of *Godspell*. With a large company of actors, musicians and crew (and 'not enough dressing rooms') she had 'the feeling that this was the *Hair* lot that had come over' to *Superstar*. This was due not only to the presence of

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<sup>64</sup> *Time Out*, No. 132, 25-31/08/1972.

<sup>65</sup> Sue Griffiths, email to the author, 21/05/08.

<sup>66</sup> *Evening Standard*, 10/08/1972.

<sup>67</sup> Paige, *Memory*, p.28.

<sup>68</sup> Faulkner-Greatorex, interview, 26/01/2006.

former *Hair* actors such as Benjamin, Nicholas and Paige, but also the ‘reputation’ to which the young stage manager had been alerted: ‘I was advised when I went there not to eat anything or drink anything unless you knew where it had come from’. Francesca recalls smelling ‘the dope coming out of the air vents onto Shaftesbury Avenue’; confirming Paige’s recollection that ‘half the cast were stoned half of the time, which added to the fun’.

As with *Hair*, but not *Godspell*, the ‘culture’ of *Superstar* involved sex as well as drugs. Francesca has observed, euphemistically, that ‘I did note one or two liaisons’, but her ability to set this in context is informative: describing such assignations as ‘typical theatre sort of stuff’, she notes that the counter-cultural concept of ‘free love’ – so integral to the ‘myth’ of ‘The Sixties’ – was not a radical departure within the theatre ‘which had had it all anyway. For years.’ Moreover, Elaine Paige has observed, as did Marianne Price of her time in *Hair*, that ‘long-lasting friendships’ frequently developed during these shows. Paige perceived that, even in comparison to other long-running West End musicals, the Rock Operas generated ‘a great sense of belonging among the casts’ who considered themselves almost as a self-contained counter- or sub-culture: ‘like an itinerant “family” ... in the West End’.<sup>69</sup>

Belief amongst the company in the artistic validity of the show – by no means universal in the theatre – was commonplace at the Palace. Francesca Faulkner-Greatorex admits that ‘you don’t necessarily think “this is ground-breaking” when you’re doing it’. Rather, ‘one looks back and thinks ... it was pivotal’. She clearly recalls, however, her conviction in 1974 that Sharman’s *Superstar* ‘was a good and effective piece of work and I’m not surprised that it ran for so long’.<sup>70</sup> By September 1978 it had, at 2,360 performances, overtaken the record set by Lionel Bart’s *Oliver!* for the longest London musical run. £7 million had been taken at the Palace box office from the two million people who had seen *Superstar* (which had also, by 1978, played in 22 countries).<sup>71</sup> It closed on 23 August 1980. A national

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.; Paige, *Memory*, pp.28-9.

<sup>70</sup> Faulkner-Greatorex, interview, 26/01/2006.

<sup>71</sup> *The Financial Times*, 30/09/1978.

tour commenced the following March. The show which succeeded *Superstar* in the West End confirms, however, Warfield's thesis that, as on Broadway, rock had become 'a four-letter word': the next Palace Theatre production was a revival of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II's 1943 musical *Oklahoma!*<sup>72</sup>

Nonetheless, *Superstar* had, as the next chapter will consider, made a significant contribution, alongside the other Rock Operas, to the profound debates over religion and spirituality which so distinguished British culture and society in the late 1960s and early 1970s. *Superstar* was, notwithstanding the more strident voices of some evangelicals, a reverent piece of work which could, at times, be deeply moving for its audiences. Francesca Faulkner-Greatorex, who worked on both shows from a front-of-house perspective, states that 'the Crucifixion was far more poignant' in *Superstar* than in *Godspell*. She recalls the closing image of Christ accompanied by the instrumental 'John 19:41',

which is lovely, and it was stunning ... And then – nothing. You could have heard a pin drop ... The audience would not applaud, and in fact sometimes didn't until the cast came [back] on [for the curtain call]. And I don't think I've ever experienced that in the theatre before and that happened ... on more than a handful of occasions ... when they got it ... 'right', if you like.<sup>73</sup>

The Crucifixion is preceded by 'Superstar', sung by Judas – resurrected in the twentieth century – and a chorus of angels. Again, juxtaposition increases the impact: ecstatic, up-tempo music complements Rice's lyrics which, while characteristically witty, nonetheless pose profound questions:

You'd have managed better if you'd had it planned  
Why'd you choose such a backward time in such a strange land? ...

Tell me what you think about your friends at the top  
Who d'you think besides yourself's the pick of the crop?  
Buddha was he where it's at? Is he where you are?  
Could Mohammed move a mountain or was that just P.R.?  
Did you mean to die like that was that a mistake or  
Did you know your messy death would be a record breaker?

Judas, with interspersed refrains from the chorus, stresses:

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<sup>72</sup> *Evening Standard*, 23/08/1980.

<sup>73</sup> Faulkner-Greatorex, interview, 26/01/2006.

Don't you get me wrong  
I only want to know

Before the angelic chorus asks:

Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ  
Who are you? What have you sacrificed? ...  
Jesus Christ Superstar  
Do you think you're what they say you are?<sup>74</sup>

The Very Reverend Martin Sullivan, in his sleeve-notes for the 'Superstar' single, went further than mere commendation of the raising of these questions. Signed in his capacity as Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, Sullivan acknowledged that

There are some people who may be shocked by this record. I ask them to listen to it and think again. It is a desperate cry. Who are you Jesus Christ? is the urgent inquiry, and a very proper one at that. ... The onus is on the listener to come up with replies. If he is Christian let him answer for Christ. The singer says 'Don't get me wrong. I only want to know'. He is entitled to some response.<sup>75</sup>

The Christian churches were, in Sullivan's view, duty-bound to provide answers on the issues of faith, belief and spirituality that permeate the four Rock Operas. Sullivan, by championing *Superstar* and, practising what he preached, turning over London's most iconic church to *Godspell* and *Hair*, helped to disprove part of Derek Jewell's prediction that younger people would be 'deterred' by 'or scornful' of the 'religious associations' of the Rock Operas. Sullivan's Cathedral would, however, become a battleground on which he would be 'caught in the crossfire' of those 'who may regard [the Rock Operas] as distasteful or even sacrilegious'. Life, Jewell warned in 1970, was 'perhaps going to be hard for *Jesus Christ Superstar*'.<sup>76</sup> It would be kinder to *Godspell* at St Paul's, but even harder for the company of *Hair*, and the Cathedral's Dean.

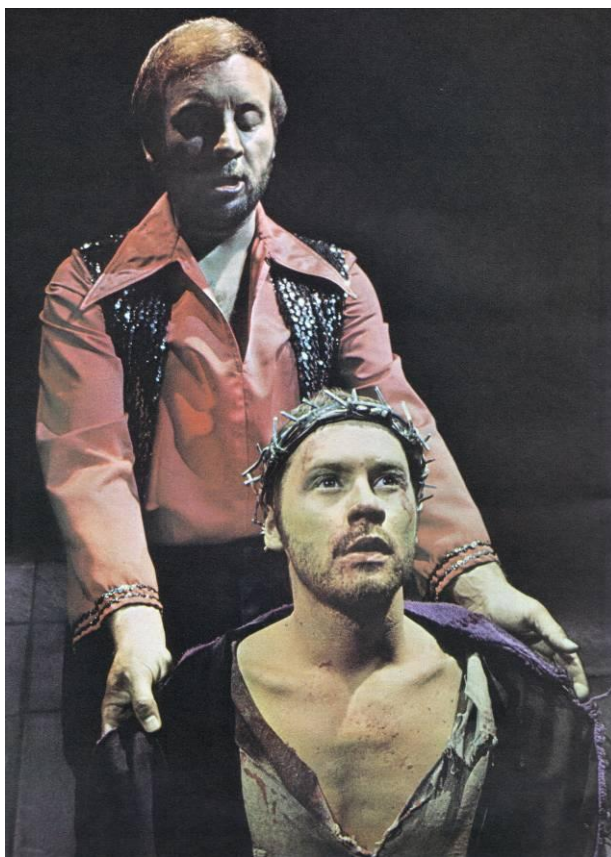
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<sup>74</sup> *Superstar* score, pp.61-64.

<sup>75</sup> Cited in Braun (ed.), *Authorized Version*, p.36.

<sup>76</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 18/10/1970.

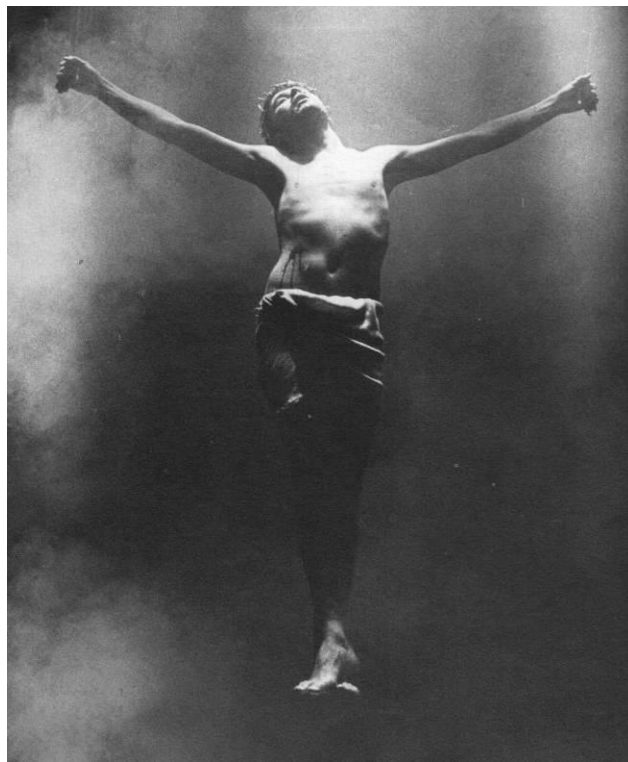




Colm Wilkinson and Christopher Neil as Judas and Jesus in the Palace Theatre production. *Jesus Christ Superstar* Souvenir Brochure and Libretto, 1974.



Judas, resurrected, sings 'Superstar' with the chorus of angels. *Jesus Christ Superstar* Souvenir Brochure and Libretto, 1974.



Christopher Neil in the Crucifixion scene.  
*Jesus Christ Superstar* Souvenir Brochure and Libretto, 1974.



The *Hair* company on the steps of St. Paul's Cathedral, December 1971.  
Sullivan, *Watch How*, facing p.193.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### Religion and the Rock Operas

#### 12.1 'Believing without belonging': the religious 'crisis' of the 1960s and the rise of the 'New Age'

Martin Sullivan's comments at the end of the previous chapter, and the exploration of Pete Townshend's inspiration for *Tommy* in Chapter Nine, suggest a connection between the Rock Operas and broader issues of religion and faith in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. This chapter places the Rock Operas in the broader context of British spirituality and religiosity, opening windows into the history of religion, the clash of cultures that distinguished the 'Sixties', and the reception of the Rock Operas.

As Sandbrook has re-emphasised, 'although the sixties are often seen as a secular, even post-religious, age, in few decades of the twentieth century were religious issues so hotly and enthusiastically debated'.<sup>1</sup> These debates were in part occasioned by rapidly falling Protestant church attendance. Whether or not these declines indicated broader 'secularization' poses a complex methodological question. If 'secularization' is taken to mean religiosity, then this is incompletely captured by any of the available indices – declared belief in 'a' God, affiliation to a religious community and 'active' parish membership. Callum Brown's cross-referencing of such quantitative research has enabled him to conclude, however, that:

the period between 1956 and 1973 witnessed unprecedented rapidity in the fall of Christian religiosity amongst the British people. In most cases, at least half of the overall decline in each indicator recorded during the century was concentrated into those years ... Across the board, the British people started to reject the role of religion in their lives – in their marriage, as a place to baptize their children, as in institution to send their children for Sunday school ... and as a place for affiliation. The next generation, which came to adulthood in the 1970s, exhibited even more marked disaffiliation from church connection of any sort, and *their* children were raised in a domestic routine largely free from the intrusion of organized religion.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sandbrook, *White Heat*, p.432.

<sup>2</sup> Callum G. Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Harlow: Pearson, 2006), pp.188-190. Emphasis in original.

This statistical collapse was dramatic because the previous decade saw predictions of religious revival, amid historically high rates of stated belief and church and Sunday School attendance.<sup>3</sup> This shift made the 1960s, for Brown, 'the most important decade for the decline of religion in British history'.<sup>4</sup>

There are multiple explanations for this chronologically specific decline. Advances in medical science can be seen to have reduced the need for spiritual reassurance. Increased social and geographical mobility made it easier to abandon parental values. The boom in leisure offered competition to church attendance. Increased government investment in education decreased reliance on Sunday Schools.<sup>5</sup> But other social changes clarify the impression solely of decline. Commonwealth immigration increased religious plurality, and 'non-Traditional' churches – including Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses – underwent a substantial rise after 1970. This growth in plurality, however, itself reduced the authority of previously dominant Christian Churches.<sup>6</sup>

During the 1960s, different 'alternatives' were also proposed by senior Christian churchmen, most controversially Dr John Robinson, Anglican Bishop of Woolwich, Labour Party member, opponent of nuclear weapons and proponent of female ordination. Robinson first gained prominence during the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* obscenity trial in 1960. He acted as a defence witness; for which he was publicly rebuked by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Robinson's 1963 book, *Honest to God*, caused still greater 'furore'.<sup>7</sup> It synthesized the theological work of Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to suggest that Christianity had reached an impasse. For Robinson, the essential problem was the prevailing image of God as a supernatural "'old man in the sky'", 'beyond the world – like a rich Aunt in Australia'. 'Radical re-casting' was required: this 'projection' of God should be 'torn down' to re-align Christianity with the modern world.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sandbrook, *White Heat*, p.437.

<sup>4</sup> Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), p.224.

<sup>5</sup> Sandbrook, *White Heat*, p.438.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, *Religion and Society*, pp.253-258.

<sup>7</sup> Sandbrook, *White Heat*, p.434.

<sup>8</sup> Robinson, *Honest*, pp.11, 14, 30, 41.

Robinson claimed to articulate the views of numerous Christians experiencing 'a process common in some form or other to many in our age'.<sup>9</sup> Sales of *Honest to God* confirmed his sense of the *zeitgeist*. The first print run of 6,000 sold out within days and it was extensively reported and serialised in the national press. By the end of 1964, 300,000 copies had been sold; 'an unprecedented amount for a theological text'.<sup>10</sup> The medium as well as the message was distinct, as Kenneth Leech noted in his 1973 book *Youthquake*:

'paperback theology' has transformed the whole structure of the Christian propaganda machine. No longer do views filter slowly through the ecclesiastical tubes, but they are fired violently upon the unchurched public. ... Theologians now speak directly to the man in the street, and so theological knowledge is widely disseminated, even if it circulates in a confused way.<sup>11</sup>

The wide dissemination of *Honest to God* elevated Robinson to lasting religious pro-celebrity status.<sup>12</sup>

*Honest to God* indicates the degree to which elements within the established Churches perceived a crisis and their belief that only by making religion relevant could disaster be avoided. The result was a range of debates, liturgical reforms and innovations in practice that borrowed the trappings of 'pop' culture to highlight the continuing relevance of Christian morality. Grace Davie has pointed out the 'rather uncritical' way in which liberal Anglican churchmen adopted guitars and handclapping – and managed simultaneously to alienate existing churchgoers whilst failing to attract many new attendees.<sup>13</sup>

Significantly, a near-simultaneous transformation took place in Roman Catholicism. The process of *aggiornamento* (or 'bringing up to date'), begun by Pope John XXIII through the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65, included the priest facing the congregation during a mass conducted in the vernacular and

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.21.

<sup>10</sup> Sandbrook, *White Heat*, p.435.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Leech, *Youthquake: the growth of a Counter-Culture through two decades* (London: Sheldon Press, (1973). p.195.

<sup>12</sup> He was one of four 'Establishment' figures selected to interview Mick Jagger on *World in Action* in July 1967.

<sup>13</sup> Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p.34; Sandbrook, *White Heat*, p.439.

assisted by the laity. This change reflected and further enabled the ecumenism which had already gathered pace amongst Protestant denominations in Britain. Davie has concluded of Vatican II that it 'sums up better than anything else the mood of religious life in the 1960s'.<sup>14</sup> It delayed but did not prevent a similar collapse of religious observation amongst British Catholics. Within a decade of Pope Paul VI's restatement in 1968 of the Church's opposition to artificial contraception, Catholic attendance in mainland Britain slumped.

As this suggests, there was a link between changing social practices and religious 'decline'. But this was more mutually reinforcing than those who hoped to rescue religion by relevance appreciated. Callum Brown has emphasised the difference between the social norms which existed prior to the religious collapse of 'The Sixties' – 'profoundly conservative in morals and outlook, and fastidious in ... adherence to respectability and moral standards' – and those which came afterwards.<sup>15</sup> The change involved not only who went to Church, but the influence of religion upon the life of the nation via legislation relating to morality. Hopes of reinstating Christianity as an organising principle of society confronted the problem that, as Davie concludes:

by the end of the decade a profound and probably irreversible revolution in social and, above all, sexual attitudes had taken place. ... Traditional, often Christian-based, values (many ... associated with family life) were no longer taken for granted.<sup>16</sup>

Did this indicate a wider societal 'secularization', in the sense of *abandonment* of faith, as opposed to decline in traditional religiosity? The notion that an increasingly sophisticated, rational, modern Britain outgrew the need for the supernatural leap of faith involved in religious belief is open to severe criticism, not least by comparison with similar Western democracies. As Davie has pointed out, the evidence suggests strongly that the British did still want to believe *in something*, even if they were not quite certain *in what*. Sandbrook summarises her thesis:

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<sup>14</sup> Davie, *Religion*, pp.34-5.

<sup>15</sup> Brown, *The Death*, pp.188-190.

<sup>16</sup> Davie, *Religion*, p.33.

A survey in 1947 had found that while only 50 per cent of people believed in the Virgin Birth, the divinity of Christ and life after death, the great majority did believe in God, and only one in twenty was a firm atheist. These figures remained fairly constant over the next forty years or so, with just under half of the population believing in an afterlife and three quarters believing in God, with the majority of the rest undecided. This is what Grace Davie calls 'believing without belonging': while participation fell out of fashion, belief remained constant.<sup>17</sup>

Disjuncture between ongoing 'belief' and its active practice through church-going meant that 'The Sixties' saw a religion-shaped hole open up in the lives of many Britons. It was not only the 'rich and famous' such as Pete Townshend who felt they 'had to find something to fill the empty space'.<sup>18</sup> To what alternatives did they turn?

One possibility was what are now broadly called 'new age' beliefs. These first gained publicity throughout the West thanks to the 1967 encounter between The Beatles and the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. In early 1968, near the peak of their global fame, The Beatles flew to India with the Maharishi for what was described as a 'religious retreat'.<sup>19</sup> Lennon and McCartney became, within weeks, disillusioned with their new guru, but George Harrison remained profoundly influenced by his experience of Indian culture and became a lifelong devotee of the Hare Krishna philosophy of Hinduism. His sitar-playing on such Beatles songs as 'Norwegian Wood' (on the album *Rubber Soul*) and 'Within You Without You' (on *Sgt. Pepper*) was a revelatory use of an instrument barely known in the West.<sup>20</sup>

The Beatles' brief association with the Maharishi undoubtedly helped to stimulate a great deal of media publicity, well into the 1970s, for Buddhism, certain aspects of Hinduism, Yoga, Transcendental Meditation and the Hare Krishna movement; and for the concept, previously confined to a tiny minority, that 'Eastern' religions might offer spiritual fulfillment.<sup>21</sup> Although the number actually *converting* to these

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<sup>17</sup> Sandbrook, *White Heat*, pp.439-40.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Guiliano, *Behind*, p.111.

<sup>19</sup> Sandbrook, *White Heat*, pp.431, 441-2.

<sup>20</sup> MacDonald, *The People's Music*, p.96.

<sup>21</sup> See Leech, *Youthquake*, pp.64-86; Brown, *Religion and Society*, pp.258-266.

movements was miniscule, the number reading about them in the papers or hearing a sitar on the radio was, in comparison to any previous generation, huge. As Macdonald concludes, 'the popular (and generally sincere) fascination with oriental wisdom, which ensued in the late sixties and thereafter, owes almost everything to The Beatles in their role as the cultural antennae of the mainstream'.<sup>22</sup>

Jumping on the yogic bandwagon was not, however, the only leap of spiritual faith apparent in the period. It is possible to draw a strong connection in terms of spiritual need and approach between the interest in 'Eastern' religions and the counter-culture as a whole. Not for nothing did John McGrath, in writing the *IT* manifesto, state that in the counter-culture 'Britain has come up with a new spiritual movement'.<sup>23</sup> The emotional investment involved in membership of the counter-culture could be considerable. Of the contributors to her collection of Sixties memoirs in the late 1980s, Sara Maitland observed the

surprising sort of embarrassment ... about their own moral seriousness at the time: a kind of flippancy or even shame that they should have cared so much, believed so strongly, and engaged so fully.<sup>24</sup>

In Maitland's interview with Julie Christie, the actor emphasised that in her experience, the search for spiritual answers was both wholehearted and more important than the associated pharmaceutical paraphernalia:

Truly an awful lot of people were really willing to take on responsibility, not be apathetic. Whether they were stoned or not really didn't matter... I certainly was affected by the whole need to understand why we're here, what life is about. I was interested in the spiritual level of these sorts of issues. I didn't get into any spiritual cults, but I was very much part of that longing for some way of making sense of the whole mess.<sup>25</sup>

As Counter-Culturalist Jonathon Green's acquaintance Su Small noted:

I've always suspected that people need something like a religion and in this period they renounced the accepted religions and went off and started

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<sup>22</sup> MacDonald, *The People's Music*, p.87.

<sup>23</sup> *International Times*, number 10, 13-26/03/1967.

<sup>24</sup> Sara Maitland, 'I Believe in Yesterday – An Introduction', Sara Maitland (ed.), *Very Heaven: Looking back at the 1960s* (London: Virago, 1988), p.13.

<sup>25</sup> 'An interview with Julie Christie – Everybody's Darling', *Ibid.*, pp.168-9.



other ones. Some of them were called political and some of them were chemically based and some of them were actually bozo religions.<sup>26</sup>

Observing from the outside, Edward Heenan, then Visiting Professor of Sociology at the College of the Holy Cross, noted that:

youth culture has rejected the religions of the larger culture ... Instead, they have created a new religious style whose goal is personal transcendence but which does not necessarily depend on any superempirical deity.<sup>27</sup>

There were, as demonstrated by the marketing of *Godspell* considered in Chapter Eight, some attempts to re-cast the deity as a quasi-counter-cultural icon. Miller, stretching to *Hair* the analogy made in the *Godspell* publicity material, has pointed out that Jesus was 'a radical political activist' who 'rejected the social and spiritual status quo', while John the Baptist was 'a first century hippie'. Both operated in the 'same spirit as the political activists of the 1960s'.<sup>28</sup> Such cultural appropriation, whether overt in *Godspell* and *Superstar* or sub-textual in *Tommy* and *Hair*, provoked global interest and controversy at a time of heightened debate around mainstream religion. Conflicting interests coalesced around the Rock Operas in the various locations in which they were performed, culminating in the unlikely locale of London's St. Paul's Cathedral.

## 12.2 The Rock Operas and St Paul's Cathedral

The opening of *Superstar* on Broadway was picketed by substantial numbers of vocal 'zealots' from Christian 'fundamentalist groups'. Alongside them were 'the Anti-Defamation League, which claimed it maligned Jews and Judaism'. This combination of the offended led James Huffman to state in 1972 that '*Superstar* seems to have as many enemies as friends on the religious fringes'.<sup>29</sup> It was not only the 'fringes', however, which were unsettled by *Superstar*. Tim Rice's emphasis on Jesus' frailties – as 'a human being who had doubts', could 'lose his temper' and 'was not always a nice guy' – did not sit comfortably, in the early 1970s, with much of mainstream Christianity. In mitigation, Rice points out that

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<sup>26</sup> Cited in Green, *Days in the Life*, p.296.

<sup>27</sup> Edward F. Heenan, 'Introduction: the Second Reformation', Heenan (ed.) *Mystery, Magic and Miracle*, p.13.

<sup>28</sup> Miller, *Let the Sun*, p.90.

<sup>29</sup> James R. Huffman, 'Jesus Christ *Superstar* – Popular Art and Unpopular Criticism', *Journal of Popular Culture*, Volume 6 number 2, Fall 1972, p.264.

'it's all there in the Gospels' and, 'as we kept stressing in endless interviews at the time, we do not say he *wasn't* God – it's up to you'.<sup>30</sup>

The posing of such questions by *Superstar* and *Godspell* attracted, as stage manager Francesca Faulkner-Greatorex recalls, 'a lot of support from the Churches'. Support was not, however, equally spread, suggesting to Francesca 'how little' the Christian hierarchy knew 'about the *text* of *Superstar*'. She notes that *Godspell* was considered 'more benign'.<sup>31</sup> At the time, Martin Sullivan agreed that 'the orthodox prefer *Godspell* chiefly because 'it makes them think less'.<sup>32</sup> Morrow has described the dominant mood of *Superstar* as 'serious purposefulness'.<sup>33</sup> That of *Godspell* might best be called 'purposeful playfulness'.

Those qualities were celebrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Reverend Michael Ramsay, who declared that *Godspell* supported and enhanced orthodox Christian belief in the deity of Jesus. Attending a performance, Ramsay mingled with audience and cast during the interval 'wine break'. He 'so enjoyed it that afterwards he went backstage' to bless the company. 'Deeply moved', Ramsay endorsed *Godspell* widely in the press.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, it attracted protests on its opening night and throughout the three-year London run.<sup>35</sup> Actor Gay Soper noted the regular presence outside Wyndham's Theatre of 'a silly bunch of frightfully narrow-minded' nuns distributing critical leaflets.<sup>36</sup> *Godspell's* leading man recalls media 'uproar' at the announcement that, hard on the heels of the 1968 Theatres Act, 'Christ was to be played for the first time' on a West End stage in a 'seemingly irreverent way' and 'by a docker's son to boot'. Essex received letters 'informing me I would burn in hell'.<sup>37</sup> Soper also, however, recalls supportive correspondence from many Christian denominations, while that from

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<sup>30</sup> Rice, interview, *Superstar* DVD.

<sup>31</sup> Faulkner-Greatorex, interview, 26/01/2006.

<sup>32</sup> Sullivan, *Watch How*, p.189.

<sup>33</sup> Morrow, 'Sgt. Pepper, Hair, & Tommy', Heenan (ed.) *Mystery, Magic and Miracle*, p.165.

<sup>34</sup> *The Times*, 05/01/1972; Essex, *A Charmed Life*, p.94.

<sup>35</sup> Essex, *A Charmed Life*, p.93.

<sup>36</sup> Soper, email, 20/06/2006. Jenny Richards of the national touring company recalls that as late as 1979, *Godspell* provoked, on its first performance in Canterbury, 'massive protests' led by 'lots of irate vicars'. Email to the author, 14/06/06.

<sup>37</sup> Essex, *A Charmed Life*, pp.91-2.

theatergoers of non-Christian faiths made her 'humbly' aware of 'how vital ecumenism was'.<sup>38</sup>

Yet the perceived ecumenism of *Godspell* was distasteful for those who wanted portrayal of Jesus to remain 'specifically Christian'. This criticism was levelled at John-Michael Tebelak during a Sunday evening television discussion programme. One of the audience was 'very sceptical indeed that you can join together the techniques of a Broadway commercial production with serious religious questions'. Asked whether *Godspell* was 'an evangelistic work' which commended conversion to Christianity or whether its primary objective was 'entertainment', a relaxed (and possibly stoned) Tebelak offered little defence. He was content to reflect burgeoning interest in the 'new age' through his *Godspell* Jesus, which 'is not purely Christian – it could be Meher Baba, it could be Confucius, it could be Buddha, it could be Dionysus'. Such non-specific spirituality was no obstacle for the post-Robinsonian 'relevance' wing of the clergy, as represented on the programme by the Reverend Bob Yeomans of the Church of England's Education department. Dressed almost as a parody of a 1970s 'trendy vicar' – in denim jacket, jeans, black shirt and dog-collar, with beatnik-style beard and mid-length hair – Yeomans confessed his 'love' of *Godspell*, from which he wanted his church to learn.<sup>39</sup>

Schoolgirl Sue Griffiths concurred. Having grown up 'associated' with but 'not an active member of' a Free Church, Sue recalls her parents being 'wary' but not condemnatory of the 'treatment of the gospels' in *Superstar* and *Godspell*. They allowed Sue to draw her own conclusions: that the latter 'definitely ... represented Christ's teachings' in an 'authentic' and 'accessible' manner and that both, while 'energetic and enjoyable', simultaneously provided 'food for thought'.<sup>40</sup> Sue's conclusions chime with those of the President of the Baptist Union in a sermon subsequently published in *The Times*. He noted that 'for some', *Superstar* and *Godspell* were 'a breakthrough in the communication of the Christian message',

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<sup>38</sup> Soper, email, 20/06/2006.

<sup>39</sup> *A Chance to Meet: John-Michael Tebelak*, BBC Television, first broadcast 09/09/1973.

<sup>40</sup> Griffiths, email, 21/04/08.

while for others they were 'blasphemous and misleading commercial exploitation[s] of a sacred subject which ought not to have such crude handling'. He encouraged his congregation, however, to rise to the 'highly significant and fundamental' questions posed by 'the latest rock-musicals', which had 'a direct bearing' upon 'the validity of Christianity, the nature of God' and 'the destiny of men', and might increase 'the number of the disciples'.<sup>41</sup>

Martin Sullivan responded so positively to *Godspell* that he allowed the Wyndham's company to perform it in the crypt of his Cathedral for televising by the BBC on the evening of Easter Sunday, 1972. The BBC's listings magazine gave prominent coverage to St. Paul's being 'rocked by a red-nosed clown'. It reported that the Dean, 'beaming with delight' after the filming, felt as if he had "'tasted something of the honeydew of paradise'". Sullivan praised the 'vulnerability' of the *Godspell* deity; indeed, that was 'one of the supreme qualities of a Christian'. David Essex was reported as having realised 'the difficulties' encountered by the 'great many clergy who've come to see the show' and how 'desperately' they sought 'new ways of communicating'.<sup>42</sup> That the show had earned at least tacit wide-spread approval was confirmed by a *Daily Telegraph* report of 'no protests or demonstrations' against *Godspell* at St. Paul's, 'such as those which occurred when "Hair" was performed in the cathedral in December'.<sup>43</sup>

The Dean of St. Paul's merits further scrutiny. Born in 1910, New Zealander Martin Sullivan was head of Chapter at St. Paul's from 1967 to 1977. In his thoughtful and amusing memoir he notes press descriptions of him on appointment as 'safe' and 'no scholar', but a sense of the Cathedral's musical heritage was a particular joy for the new Dean. Sullivan, nevertheless, swiftly enacted radical plans which chimed with the 'relevance' agenda so prominent within the Church of England in the later 1960s. In 1968, 'anxious to bring people nearer to St. Paul's and St. Paul's nearer to them', his Chapter resolved 'to use the building to show something of what is being thought and done creatively in our

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<sup>41</sup> The Rev. John J. Brown, *The Times*, 31/07/1972.

<sup>42</sup> *Radio Times*, 1-7/04/1972.

<sup>43</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 9/03/72.

midst'. Sullivan therefore turned over the Cathedral's crypt for the temporary use of about 150 London youth organizations. It became akin to an experimental theatre space-cum-art gallery, with something 'happening' 'every night in the week, except Sunday' in a basement 'arena' or 'stage on which ... could be seen typical examples of the many creative activities in which young people were engaged'. 'The result', including 'exhibitions', was 'heartening and encouraging'.<sup>44</sup>

Sullivan's embrace of human creativity as an expression of Christianity permeates his memoir. It confused the press, however, who 'were at a loss to understand our aims'. Yet there was no 'ulterior motive': this was not 'an old-fashioned religious revival in modern dress'. The potential for religious re-affirmation or conversion was, for Sullivan, secondary to the intellectual and social benefits – and the fun – of the activities.

Pop concerts completed the thoroughly modern combination of activities planned by Sullivan's 'young advisers'. Teenage Welsh singer Mary Hopkin performed on a 'huge platform under the dome' in late 1968 to an audience of 'about 2500-3000'. Sullivan found the 'din' of sweet-voiced Hopkin and her two-piece band 'terrific', but recognized the significance of pop-rock music for young people and their 'intense enjoyment' of it.<sup>45</sup> As a direct result of his 'Pop-in St. Paul's' initiative, and its well-received performance of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, Sullivan met and gave his blessing to Rice and Lloyd Webber.

The new, 'open door' policy at St. Paul's resulted in an approach from 'the Management of *Hair*'.<sup>46</sup> To mark the show's third anniversary in London, they sought to replicate the special service that had taken place in New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine to mark the third anniversary of the Broadway

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<sup>44</sup> Sullivan, *Watch How*, pp.163-4, 172, 177-8.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.178, 181-2.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.187-9, 182-3, 190.

run, for which Galt MacDermot had composed a new Mass, sung with *Hair* numbers *in lieu* of hymns by the cast and several New York choirs.<sup>47</sup>

In considering their request, the Dean went to the Shaftesbury. In his judgement, *Hair* showed 'graphically ... the futility of a life which could end up splattered across a paddy-field'. While 'in many ways it was not' to Sullivan's taste, he recognized the 'deep solemnity and yet ... gaiety' of the young people in the audience, particularly after the nude scene and some 'other moments' which he, like them, found 'deeply moving'.<sup>48</sup> Possibly Sullivan agreed with Michael Billington that 'there is more real Christianity in any five minutes of "Hair" than in the whole ... self-congratulatory uneloquent cartoon-like' *Godspell*.<sup>49</sup>

Dean and Chapter announced their resolution to conduct a *Hair* service. A storm of protest erupted in the press.<sup>50</sup> *The Daily Telegraph* reported that 87 members of the London Diocesan Synod had signed a motion of no confidence in the Dean and Chapter, while the Festival of Light had written to all Anglican Bishops 'asking them to persuade the Dean to change his mind because of the "blasphemy, encouragement of drug taking and sexual permissiveness many observers see in this show"'.<sup>51</sup>

The Festival of Light was an evangelical Christian umbrella group which, although of brief influence as a distinct movement, attracted extraordinary media attention in the early 1970s. Reflecting and fomenting the profound religious and moral debates of the period, the Festival's frenzy of activity in its peak year of 1971 justified its description by John Capon (a Christian journalist 'broadly in sympathy' with it) as 'one of the more remarkable phenomena of our time'.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Miller, *Let the Sun*, p.109. A recording was released in the USA as *Divine Hair/Mass in F*, RCA LSP-4632, 1971.

<sup>48</sup> Sullivan, *Watch How*, p.190.

<sup>49</sup> *The Guardian*, 18/11/1971.

<sup>50</sup> *Evening Standard*, 10/12/71; *The Times*, 10/10/1971; 21/10/1971; 15/12/1971.

<sup>51</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 15/12/1971.

<sup>52</sup> John Capon, ...*And There Was Light: Story of the Nationwide Festival of Light* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1972), p.4.

In his instant history of the movement, Capon recounts its founding by Peter and Janet Hill on their return to England in late 1970 'after four years of missionary work' overseas. 29 year old Peter Hill, in particular, was struck by the contrast with Britain in 1966: now, nude or semi-nude female imagery seemed to be 'everywhere', from magazines to public hoardings. During a week of fasting, meditation and prayer, Hill 'had a vision of tens of thousands of people, many of them young, marching for Christ in London and "taking a stand for righteousness"'. Other evangelical Christians confirmed Hill's vision and the need for a campaigning organization.<sup>53</sup>

The idea was seized with alacrity by those who would become the spokespeople of the Festival of Light. They included Lord Longford; 1950s rock'n'roller turned family-friendly entertainer and born-again Christian Cliff Richard, and Mary Whitehouse. Whitehouse was, by 1971, a household name in Britain and an ally of Longford against pornography.<sup>54</sup> In Capon's description, Whitehouse had

come to fame some six years previously when she had started a Clean-Up TV Campaign. An art teacher with responsibility for sex education, she had been appalled at the effect of television programmes on the girls whom she taught and had tackled the broadcast media rather as David tackled Goliath, but with growing support from all sections of the community during the late 1960s. Although ridiculed and pilloried by the liberal-intellectual fringe, the National Viewers and Listeners Association, which she founded ... made a responsible contribution to the raising of broadcasting standards.<sup>55</sup>

The objectives of the Festival of Light, for which they would campaign vigorously within sympathetic evangelical Christian parishes and through the national media, mirrored those of Whitehouse's National Viewers and Listeners Association. Britain was, from this perspective, in the midst of a 'moral landslide' which had commenced during the 1960s. 'The media and the arts' were the key generators of 'moral pollution' which had swept across society.<sup>56</sup> Regret at the passing of the era when 'The Lord Chamberlain kept a careful eye on the live theatre' figured prominently in the Festival's agenda. For one supporter, Conservative MP John

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., pp.5-8.

<sup>54</sup> Hewison, *Too Much*, p.171.

<sup>55</sup> Capon, ...*And*, p.11.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., pp.7, 13.

Biggs-Davison, 'nudity, not for art but for kicks, blasphemy and simulated sex acts' had 'won the freedom of the stage'. Biggs-Davison considered this symptomatic of 'not so much a permissive society as a licentious, callous', 'cruel' and 'perhaps even ... doomed society'.

The over-arching objectives of the movement were therefore two-fold: campaigning against 'moral pollution' while proclaiming 'the Christian Gospel as the positive answer to it'. Egregious examples of stage and screen 'sexploitation' included Ken Russell's 1971 film *The Devils*, discussed in Chapter Ten. The Festival played a prominent role in mobilizing – prior to the film's release – churches and local authorities across Britain against *The Devils*. For the Festival, the sexual innuendo and nudity which had permeated advertising (particularly of cars) and the mainstream press (specifically the topless 'Page 3' models of Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper) were on a par with Russell's film. The underground press were similarly criticized for overly sexualized content.<sup>57</sup>

The Festival held beacon-lighting ceremonies across Britain during 1971, but its campaigning activities were focused on the capital. To publicize their forthcoming rally in Trafalgar Square, an inaugural public meeting was held at Westminster Central Hall in September 1971.<sup>58</sup> Press interest was greatly stimulated when the meeting degenerated into farce. A combination of the nascent Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and some of the Counter-Culturalists who had invaded performances of *Hair* infiltrated the meeting; several *incognito* in nun costumes hired by Graham Chapman of the satirical comedy troupe 'Monty Python's Flying Circus'. When the interlopers released mice and began chanting, singing, dancing and lifting up the skirts of their habits, the meeting dissolved in furious chaos.<sup>59</sup>

Similar 'well-planned' opposition, led by the GLF 'together with the Women's Liberation Movement, sympathisers of the underground press', 'members of street theatres' and 'anarchists and Communists', greeted the Festival's largest public

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pp.87, 57, 13, 21, 101, 95-6.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp.31, 21.

<sup>59</sup> Green, *Days in the Life*, pp.380-382. On the GLF see pp.378-81 and, for example, Lent, *British Social Movements*.



event, on 25 September 1971. That the actions of the coalition of counter-demonstrators dominated media coverage of the well-attended Festival rally in Trafalgar Square and march through London reflected, in Capon's view, the dominance of 'cynics and critics' within the mainstream media.<sup>60</sup>

The next significant action by the Festival of Light was a campaign against *Hair* at St. Paul's. Martin Sullivan would not be cowed. He proceeded with the service on 12 December 1971, with the cathedral full to capacity. The Dean spoke to the congregation 'of the Person of Jesus and His attractive appeal to us all, and the love of Jesus for us and our responding love for Him'. As he confirmed 'with confidence' in a prominent 'reply to criticism' in *The Times* a week after the event, he had 'never addressed a more receptive', 'reverent, understanding and co-operative congregation'.<sup>61</sup> It is not known which other numbers were selected 'by the Cathedral's organist' and sung during the service by the choirs of the Cathedral and the Guildhall School of Music as well as the *Hair* company. The service concluded, however with the massed ranks singing what Sullivan called 'one of the best and most popular songs from *Hair*, "Let the Sunshine In"'. The Dean believed that the sun 'shone for all who took part' and could 'only hope that those who opposed us may have caught a glimpse of it as well'.<sup>62</sup>

Outside, in the gloom of a London December, Mrs Whitehouse and fellow protestors from the Festival of Light stood with their placards. Alongside them were members of Britain's ultra-right wing political party, the National Front, wielding 'racist banners'; their presence presumably a protest against the proudly multi-racial company and 'mixed media' message of *Hair*. As Capon has noted, while the Festival sought to differentiate itself from the National Front, 'the impression' could easily have been given 'to the casual observer' that the two demonstrations – one 'Christian', one racist – 'had a single mind'.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Capon, ...*And*, pp.46, 59, 81.

<sup>61</sup> Sullivan, *Watch How*, p.192; *The Times*, 20/12/1971.

<sup>62</sup> Sullivan, *Watch How*, pp.190-2.

<sup>63</sup> Capon, ...*And*, p.121.

As has already been suggested, there were important differences between the gratuitous nudity of female advertising models, 'erotic theatre' such as Tynan's *Oh! Calcutta!* or Raymond's *Pyjama Tops* and the non-sexual, Edenic nudity – male and female – of the anti-war protest moment in *Hair*. The Festival of Light's conflation of these different forms of nakedness was simplistic disingenuity. The mainstream press, in their overwhelmingly polarized coverage of the Festival's activities, did little to counter this simplification, but it made many liberal Christians deeply uncomfortable. Sullivan (in a manner similar to Ken Russell) made his position clear: 'I do not think that *Hair* is either blasphemous or obscene. I am aware that others think differently. I am also aware that scores of people who have passed judgment have not seen it'.<sup>64</sup>

Polarization was apparent in the reception of the Festival by organized Christianity. As Capon noted, while 'there was certainly a positive response from the evangelical constituency within the Anglican and Baptist Churches, together with those of Brethren and Pentecostal persuasion', the reaction of 'the official leadership of the mainstream denominations', above all the Church of England and the Catholic hierarchy, was one of 'marked coolness'.<sup>65</sup> Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath was similarly cool when, in April 1973, Whitehouse delivered to him a 'Nationwide Petition for Public Decency' containing 1,350,000 signatures canvassed by the Festival of Light and the Viewers and Listeners Association.<sup>66</sup> This 'proclamation to the Government' demanded action 'in the interest of the well-being of the nation' to protect 'health of mind, the value of the individual', 'purity' and 'the family'.<sup>67</sup> Heath's successor from 1975 as Leader of the Conservative Party, Margaret Thatcher, gave a more sympathetic hearing to and adopted some of Mrs Whitehouse's 'moral landslide' rhetoric; yet showed no inclination, in office from 1979 onwards, to reverse any of the legislation of the Jenkins 'liberal hour'.

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<sup>64</sup> Sullivan, *Watch How*, p.192; *The Times*, 20/12/1971.

<sup>65</sup> Capon, ...*And*, p.114.

<sup>66</sup> Hewison, *Too Much*, p.175.

<sup>67</sup> Capon, ...*And*, pp.76-7.

The organization and campaign methods of the Festival of Light strikingly reflected the techniques used by such counter-cultural organizations as the underground press, and by 'new social movements' such as the GLF. Like the GLF, the Festival realized immediately the importance of organization, literature, banners and badges. They embraced 'jesus-rock' and developed slogans to chant on their marches. Above all, the Festival of Light considered themselves as much a 'political' as a moral movement.<sup>68</sup> Despite the diametric opposition of their ideologies, the Counter-Culturalists may, had they known nothing about Peter Hill, have 'dug' his inciting 'vision' of the Festival, particularly given its arrival during a heightened 'spiritual state', and Hill's desire to return to missionary work in that nirvana of the 'new age': India. Were joints substituted for prayers, Capon's account of the working atmosphere in the Festival of Light's office would be remarkably similar to that of an underground periodical such as *IT*.

If sides were to be taken in this highly polarized debate, Martin Sullivan, like John Robinson, was firmly in favour of radically questioning the status quo and against any cultural counter-revolution to The Sixties. He aligned himself, in thought, word and deed, with the values represented by the Rock Operas and in direct opposition to those promoted by the Festival of Light: he disapproved of 'Pentecostal fervour and "I love Jesus" organisations' because they did not offer the Church or society 'the answers we seek'. Rather, he 'shouted' his 'encouragement to the young' who, surveying the 'sorry scene' of the contemporary world, demanded of Sullivan's generation "What are you going to do about this?". The Dean was heartened that, while post-War youth knew nothing of the hardships of the Great Depression and Second World War which had caused so much 'pain and guilt' for Sullivan's generation, the contemporary young turned their 'concern' towards 'the needs of others'. While he recognized the 'danger' that 'frustrated action so easily explodes into violence', it was, Sullivan believed, the duty of 'an older, sympathetic and compassionate generation' to 'prevent that kind of disaster'. But the onus lay with these compassionate elders: 'If we do nothing they will do something. At least they are

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.8-10.

entitled to know if we are on their side'.<sup>69</sup> A message from the *Hair* company suggested to Sullivan that they had felt he was 'on their side' during his service:

I had a Christmas card a few days ago which really touched my heart, and made me humbly thankful. It read: 'To the Dean of St Paul's ... You don't know us but thank you for welcoming us to your cathedral'.

As he told the readers of *The Times*: 'a service which evokes that response is justified by any standard'.<sup>70</sup>

Through his support of *Godspell* and *Superstar*, as well as *Hair*, Sullivan's sense of 'communion' was two-fold. The Rock Operas were, for him, holy art through which communion with God could be achieved. He recognized, however, that for writers, performers and audiences, they resulted in a more human-centred, but no less profoundly moral, emotional and spiritual engagement. In that sense, Sullivan's *Hair* service, and the Rock Opera genre, perhaps best represent the objective crystallized by the early counter-culture when they congregated at the Royal Albert Hall in 1965: one of holistic, non-specifically spiritual 'Wholly Communion'. That he should have been seeking that connection, along with the audiences, casts and creators, and against the backdrop of, but notwithstanding, the criticisms of the Festival of Light, was the product of the distinct social and cultural moment that characterized The Sixties.

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<sup>69</sup> Sullivan, *Watch How*, pp.185-6.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p.192; *The Times*, 20/12/1971.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### Conclusion

From its examination of the creation, production and reception of the Rock Operas, this thesis can draw a number of conclusions relating not only to these works, but to the period in which they originated.

The thesis has given a home within the historiography of The Sixties to a previously orphaned genre. Hitherto, it has fallen foul of what Savran calls 'violent hierarchization' based upon 'questions of authenticity and evanescence' which permeate analysis of cultural production.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the Rock Opera has only been considered part of 'Musical Theatre' when the qualifying prefix 'rock' is added. For the 'rock' world, however, all of it bar The Who's recording of *Tommy* has been portrayed as irredeemably inauthentic 'pop'. 'Mainstream' cultural study has deemed Rock Opera too 'counter-cultural'; it has been too 'low' for the 'high' arts; while for the Counter-Culturalists it is 'mainstream' and fatally tainted by commerce. For theatre historians it has been, in Bourdieu's conceptualization, an irredeemably 'middlebrow' genre, falling 'half-way between legitimate culture and mass production.'<sup>2</sup> In addition, religious reactionaries can easily, and angrily, dismiss it as 'sacreligious', while for the 'new age' it is too 'Jesus-centric'. Above all, historians of British politics, culture and society during The Sixties have, hitherto, dismissed the Rock Opera too glibly with fleeting references to terms such as 'nudity', 'anti-Vietnam', 'red-nosed clown', 'Meher Baba' or 'Lloyd Webber' (and, possibly, a footnote on 'Princess Anne').

Yet it is apparent from the previous chapters that the Rock Operas formed a significant, and unfairly neglected, phenomenon. Musically, they were a key point of intersection. As considered in Chapter Three, *Hair* was the means by which, in 1967, pop-rock music was introduced to a musical theatre genre otherwise 'totally divorced from the surrounding rock culture'.<sup>3</sup> As the evidence in Chapters Two,

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<sup>1</sup> Savran, 'Toward', *Theatre Survey*, pp.217; 214.

<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p.326.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Billington, *The Guardian*, 14/04/2010.

Nine and Eleven makes clear, Rock Operas contributed to the emergence of 'rock' by the late 1960s as a fully-fledged and significant sub-genre of pop music. They were also – and as importantly – crucial moments of technological and commercial innovation. As is discussed in Chapter Ten, *Tommy* in particular defined and enabled the economies of scale and advances in technology associated with 'stadium rock': the most lucrative and culturally significant form of pop in the 1970s and beyond. Furthermore, this thesis has made use of musical analysis (particularly in Chapters Seven, Nine and Eleven) to a degree unusual in historical work in order not only to demonstrate how innovative the Rock Operas were in their fusion of tropes of 'lowbrow' 'pop' and 'rock' with techniques of 'highbrow', learned or 'Classical' music, but also because the form of such unified musical-theatrical works can only be understood fully through consideration of the totality of their musical and dramatic texts.

The Rock Operas also provide vital evidence of how theatrical practice developed after the 1950s. As Chapter Four considers, they reinforce the case that established narratives of theatre history, including the polarized distinction between 'fringe' and 'mainstream' and the supposed 'revolution' of *Look Back in Anger*, neglect the 'middlebrow' experience of the mass of theatregoers and practitioners in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In fact, as Chapters Three, Five, Seven, Eight and Eleven have discussed, the Rock Operas, with *Hair* leading the way, played a dominant role in bringing the techniques of rehearsal and staging from 'experimental theatre' into large, commercial houses. Again, the degree to which this thesis is informed by knowledge of theatrical practice is unusual for a work of history: again, this hybridity and interdisciplinarity is central to its analysis. As a counterpoint to this more 'integrationist' narrative, the thesis has also noted that, contrary to received wisdom, *Hair* challenged the Lord Chamberlain's censorship power until the very last day such power was exercised, and that *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* were groundbreaking in their utilization of the new right, under the 1968 Theatres Act, to embody the deity on the commercial stage.

Moving from the Rock Operas in particular to ‘the counter-culture’ which forms such an important part of the mythology of the 1960s and with which they had such an unwieldy relationship, this thesis has made apparent throughout the broad and shifting coalitions that made up that ‘culture’. The diversity of routes and zeal with which its varying objectives were pursued suggest that ‘the counter-culture’ is better understood as fluid, sometimes over-lapping combinations of young people motivated to a greater or lesser degree by a cluster of beliefs and objectives, rather than as a specific, discrete – and often self-defined – societal grouping. As Chapters Five and Six make clear, those pursuing what appeared to be counter-cultural objectives included some who did not align themselves with ‘the counter-culture’ as narrowly defined – at the time and subsequently – by what this thesis has termed ‘the Counter-Culturalists’. Moreover, that narrow definition, with its obsession with ‘authenticity’, in fact led the latter self-consciously to exclude many who can be seen to have shared their wider goals and to have found the means to transmit their values to a wider audience. As Chapters Six, Nine and Eleven show, the ‘Counter-Culturalists’ negative response to *Hair*, *Godspell* and *Superstar* was counter-productive. It was often predicated upon their perceived commercial underpinning and, in part, upon a central facet of ‘middlebrow’ culture as crystallized by Bourdieu: ‘conspicuous refusal of ... heavy didacticism and grey, impersonal, tedious pedantry’. Such happy ‘conspicuous refusal’ by the Rock Operas was too often accepted uncritically by the Counter-Culturalists as ‘the counterpart or external sign of institutional competence’ and, therefore, cultural merit.<sup>4</sup> The ‘alternative hierarchy’ of the Counter-Culturalists betrayed the phenomenon identified by Savran which, ‘for apparently unimpeachable yet finally highly subjective reasons’, merely ‘separates the shows we love from the ones we hate.’<sup>5</sup> If the Counter-Culturalists’ objective was really inclusive persuasion of others towards their viewpoints, these Rock Operas could have been as effective as – and certainly involved no more selling-out to the imperatives of the market than – *Tommy*. *Hair*, *Godspell* and *Superstar* were, therefore, the great Counter-Cultural missed opportunity.

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<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p.326.

<sup>5</sup> Savran, ‘Toward’, *Theatre Survey*, p.216.

Critically, the Rock Operas were more than a musical, dramatic or counter-cultural phenomenon. They were also the result of a specific moment in the social and cultural history of Britain in which debates about personal, and particularly sexual, morality featured prominently. As Chapters Four, Seven, Nine, Eleven and Twelve have considered, this was symptomatic of the profound religious and 'spiritual' debates of The Sixties; debates which found their most visible, accessible but nonetheless controversial expression in the Rock Operas. The genre thus combined the ludic and Edenic with a seriousness of purpose directed towards consciousness-raising amongst audiences. Unashamed abandon and entertainment were utilized to highlight the most profound moral debates of the age. This confirms Savran's belief that, at its best, musical theatre is the form most 'single-mindedly devoted to producing pleasure, inspiring spectators to tap their feet, sing along, *or otherwise be carried away*.'<sup>6</sup> Transformative 'carrying away' was engendered through a unique collision of messianism and male interiority. This, while expressed through the male-dominated, 'authentic' (but hotly contested) musical language of 'rock', was also situated within traditional theatre spaces associated both with 'highbrow' culture and the charge of inherent 'inauthenticity' of 'mere' theatrical performance (as opposed to the 'authentic' *auteur* status accorded to performances by the 'rock gods'); and with the whole indelibly stained by commercialism.

These arguments point to the significance of this thesis for the study of The Sixties as a whole. The thesis challenges the existing narrative entrenched collectively by the published Counter-Culturalists who (as described in Chapter One) have established themselves through repetition and self-reference as doorkeepers to the history of the period. The thesis suggests that by revisiting archival sources, interviewing participants who have not honed their accounts through years of self-glorification, and thereby placing published accounts in context, it is possible to write a history of The Sixties that acknowledges the excitement and novelty of the period without limiting itself to a sphere defined by contemporary squabbles.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.216. Emphasis added.



In their introduction to the first published script, the writers of *Hair* sought communal harmony in the present-day while expressing hope for the future. Their aspirations summarized a central thematic concern of all four Rock Operas:

a search for a way of life that makes sense to the young, that allows the growth of their new vision, however defined or undefined that may be; to find an alternative to the unacceptable standards, goals and morals of the older generation ... (No matter that their task may never be accomplished, or that it may.)<sup>7</sup>

The extent to which that 'task' was accomplished in The Sixties, and to which it remains an ongoing project, became clear to me at a 2010 West End matinee performance of the Broadway *Hair* transfer. In an audience consisting predominantly of under-25s and over-65s, I sat between two women who were pleased to have qualified, through their receipt of a state pension, for the concessionary ticket rate. One took every available opportunity to tell other theatregoers – particularly the young – that the on-stage events were 'exactly what my generation was all about'. The other whispered to me: 'I missed out on all this the first time round. I was too busy having babies'. That both were as engaged, moved and uplifted by *Hair* as the younger audience members suggests that its thematic concerns remain just beyond reach, yet still worthy of pursuit.

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<sup>7</sup> 1968 *Hair* script, in Richards (ed.), *Great Rock Musicals*, p.389.

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