

Mark Shenton: Witnessing the birth of a new age of British musical theatre



Tamar Broadbent at Beam:2016



Mark Shenton

Mark is associate editor of The Stage, as well as joint lead critic. He has written regularly for The Stage since 2005, including a daily online column.

In Arthur Miller's great masterpiece *Death of a Salesman*, Linda Loman famously says of her husband, Willy: "Attention must be paid to such a person!" And to co-opt it to musical theatre: "Attention must be paid to such a genre!"

Musicals already dominate the West End – eight million people bought tickets to see them last year, against four million for plays – so surely a lot of attention (and the lion's share of the box office) is already going their way. How much more of a leg-up do they really need?

The fact is that, while new writing of plays thrives in theatres up and down the land, there's hardly ever been a truly coordinated attempt to develop and promote new musicals from the ground-up. Until now.

Sure, there are shows such as the National Theatre's disappointing *Wonder.land* and its previous (though also disappointing) *The Light Princess*; or its triumphant productions of Jerry Springer: *The Opera* and *London Road* that have emerged, and show the opposing sides of the coin that separate success and failure. The Royal Shakespeare Company, too, has scored a major global triumph with *Matilda*. And London's Old Vic is about to put its summer musical, *Groundhog Day*, reuniting the composer Tim Minchin and the creative team of *Matilda*, on sale. At Sheffield, soon-to-depart artistic director Daniel Evans has just announced the premier of *Everybody's Talking About Jamie*, which will premiere at the Crucible in February 2017.

A few commercial producers invest long and hard in developing new musicals – two of this year's four Olivier nominees for best musical are British shows, the recently departed *Bend It Like Beckham* (produced by Sonia Friedman) and the recently arrived *Mrs Henderson Presents* (produced by Michael Harrison), while Jamie Hendry also has a new Stiles and Drewe musical of *The Wind in the Willows* premiering regionally in Plymouth in October, with an eye (presumably) on a West End transfer.

There are also smaller-scale initiatives, such as Aria Entertainment's annual *From Page to Stage* festival, now in its fourth year, or *Perfect Pitch* – first established in 2008 and now in receipt of Arts Council England funding, which will see a show developed under its auspices head to the West End with the opening of *The Go-Between* in May, five years after it was co-produced by three regional theatres.

But last week, for the first time, we saw how they are only part of a much bigger picture of new musicals that are being written by independent writers all over the place. *Beam:2016*, co-produced by Mercury Musical Developments and Musical Theatre Network in association with the Park Theatre, was a two-day event held at the latter – and I've never felt a buzz quite like it. I chaired the opening session in which I spoke to three younger directors – Adam Lenson, Kate Golledge and

Lottie Wakeham – about the challenges of developing and creating the new musicals that they're each actively involved in.

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It was then followed by a series of workshops and presentations in three of the Park's spaces

– its 200-seat main house, 90-seat studio and

upstairs meeting room – in which six new musicals were given 25-minute showcases, another 25 were given 10-minute pitching platforms, and another nine producing organisations pitched shows they had in development, including West End actor-turned-producer Michael Peavoy, who is co-producing a brand-new musical *The Buskers Opera* that is premiering at London's Park Theatre in April.

More than 40 writers were represented. Some of them are already established, such as Dougal Irvine (who as well as *The Buskers Opera* was also pitching *Angry Birds*, a new show I saw an early development workshop of at a college in east London), Craig Adams (whose *Therese Raquin* played at the Park after transferring from the Finborough Theatre), Pippa Cleary and Jake Brunger (who wrote the musical version of *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 3/4*, that was produced at Leicester's Curve Theatre) and Tim Sutton (currently working at the National as musical director on *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and previously in the West End as MD on *Memphis the Musical*). But none has yet had a break-out hit that might send them on their way; while lots of other younger writers, such as Tamar Broadbent, Chris Ash and Tim Connor are also circling around, waiting for a break.

What Beam did was to bring them all to the same party – and make them part of a community, rather than being isolated in their writing cells. New York has many such initiatives; now, for the first time in recent history, London has provided one. And it isn't just about inventing the future, but also learning the lessons of the past: one workshop saw Claude-Michel Schonberg, composer of the longest-running musical in West End history (*Les Miserables*) sharing his wisdom and experience with Brunger and Cleary on their new National Youth Music Theatre show *Prodigy*; another saw the ever-erudite Jeremy Sams and Howard Goodall talking about workshopping experiences, with Goodall demonstrating how one song in his show *Bend It Like Beckham* changed over the course of four workshops.

It was an inspiring event – and a provocative one. The future of the British musical may well have born in those two days in Finsbury Park.

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