

"And a blank page was quite beautiful on its own, she'd found. There were already so many words, so many voices in the world. She flinched at contributing to the cacophony."

- Deanna Fei, *A Thread of Sky*



NUC Concerts

May 18, 2pm, Great Hall
Do you hear the People Sing!

Music theatre greats

August 3, 2pm, Great Hall
I Remember
Commemorating the 100th
Anniversary of the outbreak
of World War I.

December 3, 2pm
Christ Church Cathedral

Do you hear the people sing...

A few observations about musical theatre, a brief look at our next concert and a final word from Mary Poppins.

Plato hated theatre, which he believed was a distraction from our pursuit of truth, dangerous and hubristic, imperfectly imitating life. He was also of the opinion that "Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination and life to everything". I have no idea what he would think of musical theatre.

Come to think of it, what, exactly, is musical theatre?

Sir Trevor Robert Nunn, CBE is an English theatre, film and television director. Nunn has been the Artistic Director for the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Royal National Theatre, and, currently, the Theatre Royal, Haymarket. He says "I've never had any feeling of disconnection between the classical theatre, or the contemporary theatre, or musical theatre, or the thing that we call opera."



The first musical I ever attended was *Lola Montez*, at the Elizabethan Theatre in Sydney in 1958. *Lola* was one of the major Australian musicals of the 1950s, with successful runs in Brisbane and Melbourne. Not so in Sydney, where it lost money.

Lola Montez was the Madonna of the 19th century, the lover of many European celebrities, even royalty. She visited the goldfields of Ballarat, where she outraged some of the locals by removing much of her clothing in her infamous *Spider Dance*. The miners loved her, and showered the stage with gold nuggets. But the Editor of the Ballarat Times gave her act a panning. *Lola* responded by horsewhipping him in public.

The original cast recording was the first stereo LP to be released in Australia, and I particularly remember one of the songs from the show – *Be My Saturday Girl* – which is the most recorded song in Australian musical theatre history.

I had the good fortune to work with Peter Benjamin, who wrote the lyrics for *Lola*. I produced an audio-visual presentation to celebrate International Women's Year in 1975, and I thought I'd done a pretty good job, but Peter took hold of my work and changed the timing, usually by fractions of a second, and brought my production to life.

Lola was performed by the Singleton Theatrical Society in 2003, and I had the pleasure of renewing my acquaintance with Peter. This



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was probably the last performance he attended – he died soon afterwards.

The shows we know as musical theatre almost certainly arose out of vaudeville in the 19th century, which usually featured much innuendo. Singer Marie Lloyd was taken before the local watch committee for her song *She sits among the cabbage and peas*, so she changed the lyrics to *She sits among the cabbages and leeks*. Perhaps Marie inspired Benny Hill!

Musical comedy proper probably originated on Broadway between 1878 and 1884, with lyrics by Ned Harrigan and music by David Braham. They featured characters and situations taken from the everyday life of New York's lower classes – without the showgirls of the typical burlesque show of the time.



In England, Gilbert and Sullivan were producing their unique style of comic opera - the poster is from 1885. They were inspired by Jacques Offenbach, and in turn inspired many others. Their influence on American and British musical theatre is considerable. It's fitting that our next concert will feature some of their classics from *The Mikado* and *The Pirates of Penzance*.



In 1947 the Yip Harburg-Burton Lane musical "Finian's Rainbow" opened on Broadway. It told the story of an Irish immigrant, Finian McLonergan, who

settles in the town of Rainbow Valley in the mythical state of Missitucky. He intends to bury a stolen pot of gold in the shadows of Fort Knox, in the belief it will grow and multiply, while he finds a husband for his daughter, Sharon. He is pursued by Og, a leprechaun from whom he stole the gold, who wants to recover his treasure before the loss of it turns him permanently human. It also

features a corrupt and racist senator, but turns out happily in the end - *When the Idle Poor become the Idle Rich*. As we'll sing in the finale : "On that great come and get it day, Won't it be fun when worry is done and money is hay."

Cole Porter's first Broadway show was *See America First* in 1916. It was a flop. Despite writing some memorable songs, he was considered to be 'washed up' by the time he wrote his great musical, *Kiss me Kate* in 1948. The show was based on the Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*.



The opening number is *We Open in Venice*: "A troupe of strolling players are we... just a simple band who roams about the land dispensing fol-de-rol frivolity." Perhaps you'll remember the Rat Pack's version from the 1960s. Now it's our turn!

Guys and Dolls opened on Broadway in 1950, with music and lyrics by Frank Loesser and book by Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows. It was based on two short stories by Damon Runyon and borrows characters and plot elements from other Runyon stories. It ran for 1200 performances and was selected as the winner of the 1951 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. However Abe Burrows was in trouble with the House Un-American Activities Committee, and the Trustees of Columbia University vetoed the selection. No Pulitzer for Drama was awarded that year.



The characters are memorable. In *Fugate for Tinhorns* three gamblers - Nicely-Nicely Johnson, Benny Southstreet, and Rusty Charlie - discuss the odds : "I tell you Paul Revere - now this is no bum steer, it's from a handicapper that's real sincere."

Nicely-Nicely provides one of my favourite moments. "I dreamed last night I got on the boat to heaven... And by some chance found a bottle in my fist - and there I stood, Nicely passin' out the whisky... But the passengers, they knew right from wrong... [and] all said sit down, *sit down, you're rockin' the boat*." A great temperance moment.

My Fair Lady is said by some to be the perfect musical. It is based upon George Bernard Shaw's

Pygmalion, with book and lyrics by Alan J Lerner and music by Frederick Loewe. Others had tried – Oscar Hammerstein and Richard Rodgers failed, and advised Lerner that it just couldn't be done.

Lerner persevered, and when it opened on Broadway in 1956 it was a hit, and set what was then the record for the longest run of any major musical theatre production in history.

Not without drama!

Noel Coward was offered the part of Henry Higgins, but turned it down. Mary Martin turned down the role of Eliza. On opening night of its pre-Broadway tryout, Rex Harrison locked himself in his dressing room because he didn't want to sing with a live orchestra. "Under no circumstances," he said, would he go on that night "with those thirty-two interlopers in the pit." Eventually he did, the show was successful, and the rest is history.



Perhaps to continue the racing theme, the choir will sing *Ascot Gavotte*. What a smashing, positively dashing spectacle!

Fellini's 1957 film *Le notti di Cabiria* is the story of a waifish lady of the night who wanders the street of Rome searching for true love and romance. However, in the musical loosely based on the movie, the central character is a dancer-for-hire at a dance hall in New York.

Sweet Charity, with music by Cy Coleman, lyrics by Dorothy Fields and book by Neil Simon, premiered on Broadway in 1966.



In the musical, *The Rhythm of Life* is performed by Daddy Johann Sebastian Brubeck, Daddy's Assistants, Daddy's All-Girl Rhythm Choir and The Company. That's hard act to follow, but we

guarantee to put 'a tingle in your fingers and a tingle in your feet' when we perform this piece.

Les Miserables premiered in Paris in 1980.

Victor Hugo's novel was published in 1862, and is



considerably heavier going than the musical. It examines, inter alia, the nature of law and grace, the history of France, the architecture and urban design of Paris, politics, moral philosophy, antimonarchism, justice, religion, and the types and nature of romantic and familial love.

This portrait of Cosette by Emile Bayard appeared in the original novel.

After 14 chapters Hugo introduces Jean Valjean, and the story with which we are all, I'm certain, familiar, begins.

The choir will perform a medley of songs from the musical - At the End of the Day, I Dreamed a Dream, Castle on a Cloud, Do you Hear the People Sing, On My Own, Bring Him Home and the Finale.



In Paris in the 1880s, Georges Seurat was developing the techniques of Pointillism - creating a luminous effect in his paintings with tiny brushstrokes of opposing colours. *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* – 1884 is one of his most famous works.

Sunday in the Park with George, with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and book by James Lapine, opened on Broadway in 1984. It tells the imagined stories of the characters depicted in the painting, including a love affair between the artist and his long suffering muse, Dot – she's the one holding the umbrella. "Sunday, by the blue purple yellow red water, On the green purple yellow red grass. Let us pass through our perfect park" Can a song bring a painting to life? Why not!

That's our next concert. Come along for an afternoon of great music from great musicals. You'll certainly enjoy it. As Mary Poppins says : "Anything can happen if you let it".