

The Editor Prompts

Take heart: the orgy scene in Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Stephen Ward* is not the worst piece of musical theatre you have missed.

Theatre Record has a good track-record in recommending theatre books which might otherwise have escaped our readers' attentions. Seven months after we recommended Jackie Harvey's *Stage Managing Chaos* [McFarland 978-1476666648] the book won the Society of Theatre Research's prestigious 2017 Theatre Book Prize, which was presented by Sir Richard Eyre in the Grand Saloon at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane.

Thus we have high hopes in recommending Adrian Wright's *Must Close Saturday: The Decline and Fall of the British Musical* [Boydell & Brewer 978-1783272358]. This book prises open the neglected history of the British musical flop and presents a rolling panorama of the good, the bad and the downright ugly – many of which have featured in **Theatre Record**.

Indeed our very first issue carried this review of *The Mitford Girls*, a musical by Caryl Brahms and Ned Sherrin at the Globe, 08 October 1981:

A disappointing collage about the infamous sisters apparently amassed in the hope that some of the Milford family's notorious wit would rub off on the show. Most of the material has already been shown in the excellent TV documentary, the rest is more fun in the books. And alas the shimmering nostalgia of the set and valiant performances can't detract from the sheer ghastliness of the songs. For the second time in six years' reviewing, I snuck out in the interval."

– Ros Asquith, *City Limits*

And the unsurpassed Michael Coveney in the *Financial Times* was even more scathing, disliking "this entirely trivial cocktail concoction," characterising it as "just one more show off the camp necrophiliac assembly line".

The ominous announcement "Must Close Saturday" too often heralded the demise of many a British musical. But the question might be how we find out why they were so awful without having to read the whole of **Theatre Record**. Adrian Wright's authoritative chronicle of a half century's history of the commercially unsuccessful British musical answers that question, uncovering a wealth of fascinating material and quoting prolifically from the reviews.

Starting at 1960 and beginning with a fascinating overview of British Musical Theatre through the years since, the book seeks to include all shows staged in London's West End that did not manage to achieve 250 performances. It devotes at least one page to each show, with an average of five shows and five years per chapter.

Some of the examples are wonderful. *Troubadour* (1978) was dire in every respect except for Kim Braden, who had the only memorable song ("If there is Love"). It ran for only 76 performances, because the management gave out free tickets to everyone in the audience, as well as a glass of champagne for the first 100 people to arrive at the theatre – there were never more than 100 people in the audience.

Through my own deep-seated prejudices, I would expect a lot of the "sung-through" shows to fail. Why the immortal words "Would you like a cup of tea?" "Yes, white with two sugars" should be sung has always been beyond me. But singing along with the milk-in-first is minor nonsense in the tradition of overkill. *Dracula* (2004) managed to ruin a simple kiss with its horrific lyric "Give me your mouth upon my mouth", making the kiss simultaneously impossible by singing it and also slightly revolting to think about. And yet proper musicals seem to have failed as well. So I can no longer just put the lack of a book down as an excuse for dire awfulness.

This book is not only written for the general reader, then, but also for the more assiduous researcher. Either way, it should certainly be on all library shelves. I adored it, dipping in and out with wild abandon whilst rushing back to **Theatre Record** again to read another full set of archive reviews. So, should a PhD aspirant be wishing to offer a thesis on "why musicals fail" – perhaps too 'operetta' in style for the tastes of the time, perhaps because sung-through, or perhaps just because plain awful – this is the reference book for them. And it will keep them entertained as they double-check the cross-references and meticulously write up their footnotes in the dry, bookstacked library. The rest of us can just read it, go back to our **Theatre Record** archive, and relax and chuckle over its happy memories.

THEATRE RECORD

was published from 1981-1990 as
London Theatre Record
and is printed in England,
published every two weeks,
and indexed annually

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FRONT COVER:

Bertie Carvel is Rupert Murdoch in *Ink*,
James Graham's new play, at the Almeida
(*Marc Brenner*).

THEATRE RECORD

(ISSN 0962-1792
USPS No 006-635)
is published bi-weekly
by Theatre Record Ltd
and distributed in the US by
DSW, 75 Aberdeen Road,
Emigsville, PA 17318-0437.
Periodicals postage paid
@ Emigsville PA.
POSTMASTER:
send address changes to
THEATRE RECORD,
c/o PO Box 437,
PA 17318-0437 Emigsville.