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Andrew Lloyd Webber at 60

How appropriate, I mused while settling down to watch the second episode of *I'd Do Anything*, that the show should come to be aired on Andrew Lloyd Webber's 60th birthday on 22 March (a date shared, coincidentally, with Stephen Sondheim). As the opening sequence unfolded, I began to reflect on the career of the man whose phenomenal success has led to his becoming first Sir Andrew and then Lord Lloyd-Webber of Sydmonton (his name gaining a hyphen in the process).

I called to mind the string of long-running box office hits that have cemented his reputation as the leading composer of late twentieth-century British musical theatre: *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Evita*, *Tell Me on a Sunday*, *Cats*, *Starlight Express*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Aspects of Love*, *Sunset Boulevard*. And here, as he presided over the latest in a series of television talent discovery shows forming part of BBC1's prestigious Saturday night line-up, was incontrovertible evidence that Lloyd Webber continues to go from strength to strength.

As the aspiring Nancys lined up for the new Cameron Mackintosh production of Lionel Bart's *Oliver!*, I started to connect the proverbial dots between the stage musicals of Lloyd Webber's heyday and his present tie-ins with television. The turning-point surely came in 1991, when the restaging of *Joseph* saw a string of big-name talents donning the multicoloured coat by way of ensuring renewed publicity and continuing to bring in the crowds. The first, Jason Donovan, had attained fame jointly through his role in the Australian soap *Neighbours* and within the realm of popular music; his successor Phillip Schofield, however, was known only from British television and had little prior experience as a singer. Likewise, in the years that followed, three of Lloyd Webber's best-known musicals – *Evita*, *Joseph*, and *The Phantom of the Opera* – were released as films, not all of whose cast members were renowned for their singing voices.

But it was when his plans to engage Scarlett Johansson for the lead role of a new production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The Sound of Music* fell through that Lloyd Webber took the relationship between musical theatre and television to new levels in 2006. Launching a heavily publicized nationwide competition for an unknown artist to play the part of Maria von Trapp, he served up the results in the much-hyped television show *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?*.

This novel format proved so successful that it has led to two spin-off series to date: *Any Dream Will Do* last year, which cast fresh talent in the title role of Lloyd Webber's own *Joseph*; and the presently-running *I'd Do Anything*. A further show, *You're the One that I Want!* (set up to find a new Sandy and a new Danny for a revival of *Grease*), was taken Stateside by Lloyd Webber's fellow *Maria* judge David Ian.

At the same time, Lloyd Webber has not simply reduced television-generated publicity to a stale, repetitive formula: his recent collaboration with Channel 4's *Hollyoaks* – in which one of the soap's characters landed the lead in *The Sound of Music* just as the actress who

plays her, Summer Strallen, assumed the role in real life – was both creative and unparalleled.

Given the evolving link between musical theatre and television, it is surely no coincidence that two of the musicals that have made the most impact on the London stage in recent years, *Jerry Springer: The Opera* and *Avenue Q*, are themselves indebted to television shows. (Even here, Lloyd Webber's own projects seem never to be very far from view, as illustrated by the recent casting of *Any Dream Will Do* finalist Daniel Boys, profiled in the last issue of *Musical Stages*, in the lead role for *Avenue Q*.)

Film has enjoyed a strong relationship with musical theatre for some decades, I reminded myself, while television has more recently exploited its possibilities through musical episodes of such cult series as *Ally McBeal*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *The Simpsons*. Indeed, it seems that the only successful musicals for which the connection between stage and screen remains unremarkable are those whose popularity derives from the use of hit songs that have already stood the test of time, such as Abba's *Mamma mia!* and Queen's *We Will Rock You*.

And, as host Graham Norton's voiceover brought *I'd Do Anything* to a close, my thoughts lay not with who might be the next Oliver or Nancy, but with who might be the next Lloyd Webber. The current absence of obvious successors amongst the younger generation of composers, which has previously elicited much comment, now becomes more pressing as the man himself approaches retirement age.

But even Lloyd Webber has been unable to match his former achievements with his later musicals; none of *Whistle Down the Wind*, *The Beautiful Game*, *The Woman in White*, and the revised *By Jeeves* have attained the longevity of his previous successes. His recent turn towards primetime terrestrial television as a means of sustaining interest in his theatrical projects, moreover, is an option only open to somebody of his grand standing within the industry to begin with, and would simply be unavailable to those just starting out today. So it is hardly surprising that Lloyd Webber remains unrivalled: he is fast becoming an impossible act to follow.

If British musical theatre is to outlive him, then, he should perhaps consider dedicating his next televised competition to launching the career of an up-and-coming composer rather than to discovering new talent for the stage itself.

CHRISTOPHER WILEY