

MUSICALS NOW

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Publicity for the Andrew Lloyd Webber/Trevor Nunn musical *Starlight Express*, which opens in London at the end of March, describes it as a 'new multi-media musical entertainment'. What are the conventions of musicals and how will this one deal with them?

It is possible to reckon on the presence of certain characteristic features of the musical — and some innovations. All the characters in *Starlight Express* are trains. Like other popular art forms one of the bases of the musical's appeal is a direct engagement with its audience about why they should bother to see it. The musical doesn't really exist until it has an audience and a performance. The ideal audience experience seems to be that combination of the tried, tested, familiar (and much loved) with the daring, different, 'never been done before'.

Apart from the absolute givens of music, song and dance, the most obvious mark of the musical is its discontinuity, the way in which it breaks from one mode into another; from dialogue into song, or song to dance, or dance into the resumption of dramatic action. Each of these modes has its own rules and capacities which reinforce the fact of the interruption. On the technical side — say, lighting or sound — important adjustments are required. These breaks are not obscured from the audience. Since the early twentieth century and Jerome Kern's *Showboat*, there have been attempts to make the action slide casually into song, and that approach has subsequently tended to be used as a measure of *value* for musicals; but discontinuity has never really been a disadvantage.

The fact that consistency is irrelevant highlights an interesting set of effects or

connections, from the impossibility of any potential the musical has for offering itself as naturalistic to the way in which it focuses attention on what actually *is* happening — the compression and intensification within the song, dance etc, provided by the knowledge that it will end before too long. The problem with continuity and coherence is that you have to be in on it from the start to get the most out of it. That isn't true of the musical where breaks allow you to get your breath back, but which consequently is devoted precisely to making that impossible. That is another familiar quality of the musical — the way it grapples with the possible and the impossible, tries to reconcile the irreconcilable.

The way the musical endeavours to render you unwilling or unable to lose concentration is through its overabundance; every part of it has to be filled up and overflowing. A critic wrote of Barnum and Bailey's circus in 1881: 'The only drawback to the performance was that the spectator was compelled to receive more than his money's worth; in other words, that while his head was turned in one direction he felt he was losing something good in another'.

Traces of the same concerns powerfully affect the musical, whether in the number of elements it comprises, the kinds of performance and production it demands, the necessity for all-round brilliance, or the very explicit nature of its show-iness. The look, or good look, of a musical is crucial, and it has to be conspicuous, visible to the audience. Sets, costumes, special (magical) effects, gimmicks, exotic settings, big production numbers, live orchestras, even lavish programmes and luxurious auditoria — these are all expectations set up by the musical. The sorts of words used to describe it; 'opulence', 'extravaganza', 'dazzling', 'perilous', 'explosive', the positive boasting of production costs, all contribute to that idea of the magnificent, gorgeous, sensuous spectacle. It is called, after all, 'show business'.

The musical aims to please. All the money and effort and excellence and organisation are *for* an audience and are on show. And this audience is undifferentiated in terms of its capacities to be bowled over by what it sees; and for the price of a ticket, they all come to be part of that material

wealth; to feel, each spectator, like a king or a queen.

In a strange sense the musical is a rather democratic affair. Accessibility and involvement are essential. Plots, where they exist, are simple and easy to follow, themes are familiar and easy to understand, characters have ordinary concerns, the emotional context is sentimental, sometimes nostalgic, sometimes a celebration of the everyday. The democracy extends to the performers; talent and skill are what matter and possession of these cuts across barriers. Black performers, for example, have been able to penetrate popular musical entertainment forms more easily than most others and it is generally agreed that they are still the leaders in the creation/evolution of new dance styles. When a performance is great all the barriers come down. 'The spectacle of Jolson's vitality had the same quality as the impression I got from the New York skyline — one had forgotten that there still existed in the world a force so boundless, and exaltation so high, and that anyone could still storm Heaven with laughter and cheers'. (Al Jolson in *Sinbad*)

To speculate briefly on *Starlight Express* in this connection: a pattern of connotations is attached to the idea of characters who are trains, which are at one and the same moment both modern, democratic, common and communal means of transport, *and* objects of nostalgia representing a nineteenth century world which is often described as in the process of destruction. For a considerable minority the train is also a magical, fascinating, exciting thing. Andrew Lloyd Webber has already successfully presented characters as animals in the musical *Cats*. It is interesting too that some of his compositions, praised for their 'evocative melodies and fine orchestration', have moved away from a story towards an attempt to capture a mood or a theme through a series of linked songs; I would expect a development of this element in *Starlight Express*.

I'm not sure I like the shift away from people: it seems to overemphasise the fantasy and ephemerality in the way musicals are experienced. But perhaps that's appropriate for present times and only a massive displacement onto non-humans will allow the flow of magic to start.