

DRAMA

Jingles, Jangles

David Edgar sees the musical establishing a grip on Britain's theatre. **Paul Allen** profiles **Dennis Potter**, whose *Singing Detective* attracted superlatives from the critics. And **Tracy Brabin** talks to the new phenomenon of British television, **Emma Thompson**.

There was a week in June which said it all. On Sunday the 7th, the British musical *Les Miserables* swept the board at Broadway's most prestigious award ceremonies in New York. On the following Thursday, Margaret Thatcher was re-elected. And three days after that, the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) - originator of *Les Miserables* announced that it was Elm in the red, and facing bankruptcy.

All three events had their sequels. The triumphant, global progress of *Les Miserables* continued. In July, Arts Minister Richard Luce lambasted what he called the 'welfare state mentality' of the subsidised arts and heralded the brave new world of 'incentive funding.' And, true to that spirit, the RSC staved off the brokers' men by an unprecedentedly large sponsorship deal with the Royal Insurance company.

The paradox of the RSC's position is not unique. The most dramatic development of the mid-to-late 80s in the theatre - a trend which came to a head in 1987 - has been the ever-widening gap between the smasheroos and the also-rans. It was never completely true that the RSC could put on the telephone directory and fill the Barbican, but there was for a long time a bedrock audience that would come to almost everything that the company presented, on those grounds alone. Now the audience is much more choosy: it is much less likely to take risks with the unknown, and much more clear about what it likes, which is - to a dramatically burgeoning degree - the large-scale, technologically-based stage musical.

As I write, there are 35 shows on in the West End, ranging from Dame Edna,

Jeffrey Archer and 'Allo 'Allo to the National Theatre's lauded revival of Arthur Miller's *View from the Bridge* and the RSC's hit adaptation of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. 13 of those shows are musicals, including the first four of the box office top 10. And the harmonisation of the British theatre is not restricted to the commercial metropolis: since the National successfully revived *Guys and Dolls*, the national subsidised companies have viewed the form as legitimate territory.

Not surprisingly, the involvement of the subsidised theatre in the musical form has been questioned, and those classical directors who have staged musicals have been called upon to defend their decision. Interviewed in this very periodical, (*MT*, August) the National Theatre's director-in-waiting Richard Eyre argued that the whole thing had been much exaggerated; while Trevor Nunn, director or co-director of three of the top four (*Starlight Express*, *Cats* and *Les Miserables*), mounted a high-profile defence of his musical work in a spirited piece in *The Guardian*, arguing that, far from being a trivialisation or a travesty, his 'Hugo' transformation had made a masterpiece accessible.

Nunn's remarks on the musical were part of a general defence of popular theatre, written to coincide with his own production of Thomas Heywood's rumbustious Elizabethan comedy, *The Fair Maid of the West*, in the RSC's new Globe-style Swan theatre. But the argument for popular classics is surely of a different order than the argument for subsidised institutions originating hit musicals. *The Fair Maid of the West* was justly a sell-out in Stratford, and did respectably during its limited



Les Miserables: Swept the board with awards on Broadway

run at the Mermaid Theatre in London. But *Starlight Express* it was not, and could never have been.

For, surely, to equate hit musicals with hit classics is as fundamentally inappropriate as to judge the relative worth of Mills and Boon and the Booker shortlist on the grounds of comparative sales. Musicals can fail, of course; but by their very nature, they are a qualitatively different phenomenon from straight drama, and attending them is a demonstrably different experience. And the danger is that, if performed in the same kind of playhouse, and by the same sort of company, a kind of aesthetic version of Gresham's law will begin to operate, and the expectations of the musical experience will begin to inform and

corrupt the expectations of the straight play.

Because the fact is that attending any musical is an easier (and thus, for its audience, more passive) experience than any straight play, in the same way that the most light-hearted of radio plays demands from the listener what the most oblique of tv drama hands the viewer on a plate.

The commercial pressures that have been placed on the national companies and the repertory theatres by underfunding are forcing these theatres into programming that can set up false expectations in playgoers, and creates a misleading context for the rest of their playgoing. To point this out is neither to call for a blanket ban on music in the theatre nor to side with those who, in Tre-

Emma's Good Fortune

1987 has really been Emma Thompson's year. With two successful tv series behind her - *Tutti Frutti* about a fading Scottish rock band, *The Majesties*, and *Fortunes Of War*, the BBC's adaptation of Olivia Manning's novels, she's now writing her own comedy series.

How will you look back over 1987?

The major thing was the election. That was a bad day. But personally I've had a good year, two months in Egypt followed by two months in Greece filming *Fortunes Of War*. What more could I want? I travelled to all those places with wonderful people.

Now I'm writing a comedy series, which has reduced me to a quivering heap of jelly, full of doubt, instability and insecurity. But then it's the end of the year and I need a rest.

The election was quite dramatic in showing a strong North/South divide. When you played the Glaswegian Suzie Kettles in *Tutti Frutti* did you feel conscious of the problem?

The divide does clearly exist. I felt it very strongly through the miners' strike. I got involved with the Frickley Ladies Action Group in London and that's the time it really hit me. It also affects institutions like the BBC. When *Tutti Frutti* came out from BBC Scotland, there was a lot of, 'Good grief! Scotland has come up with something'. But Scotland is full of wonderful playwrights, artists and poets and has a strong sense of culture. I love Glasgow. I think I'm a nicer person when I'm in Scotland. London brings out the demon in me.

***Tutti Frutti* gave us a strong picture of the Scottish male, particularly in Robbie Coltrane's character. Did you feel it was accurate?**

The women were as strong and tough as the men, which I

think is a hallmark of Byrne as a writer. But Scottish men at their worst are the worst. The most violent and oppressive. At their best they're the best. The Celtic streak makes them far more emotional which is very refreshing. I'm very bored with the tight-arsedness of English men.

But your relationship in *Tutti Frutti* was a very violent one.

But accurate. No-one would expect Kettles to be involved with a violent man, but it can happen to us all. When we were making those scenes the women on the set said we've all been there. Violence makes you feel either like a failure or that you have to protect someone, or, perversely, that they care about you. Myself, I feel part of a new renaissance of women who aren't conned by that.

***Tutti Frutti* was part of an exciting tv drama year. Do you think that daytime tv and night network tv is going to water that quality down?**

Well it's down to economics. I mean, *Fortunes* was a nine-month shoot for 10 hours of tv. *Fawlty Towers* was 44 weeks per series, whereas some tv is done in a week. You can tell the difference.

***Fortunes* was set in a period running up to and including the second world war. It was a part of British history that saw the sun set on the empire. How did it feel being part of that decaying colonialism?**

I didn't think about it from that angle, as you can only feel that in retrospect. At the time you're only a small human being. For Harriet, the sway of the empire wouldn't be felt. At one point in it she's asked by a soldier: 'Do you need protection?' and she says, 'No, I'm an English woman'. And I feel that's more to do with the nature of English women than the sense of being part of an empire. She was proud of her liberty. As Germaine Greer says, we are free women in the West, but women from the East might not agree. An Egyptian woman on the television crew, Nayra Atrya, has written a book called *Khul Khal* which is a collection of stories from Egyptian women. Basically it concerns



vor Nunn's words: 'too often equate the esoteric with the excellent'. Far from it. For there are other models to be followed, other trends to be observed: from the continuing growth of a grass-roots women's and black theatre, to the spread of the community theatre movement from its rural origins into the urban environment.

In other words, there is a difference between the populist and the popular. The major theatrical institutions do not *have* to follow the yellow brick road into realms properly occupied by the strictly commercial theatre, a world too often inhabited by the vacant spectacle, the hi-tech vacuum. The most cheering developments of the last 12 months indicate that there are more appropriate journeys to be made. •



1987: Emma Thompson's year

circumcision. Being Western we get horrified about female circumcision. Yet they would be horrified at my life. Twenty eight, unmarried and no-one to love me.

Moving on to the theatre, what future do you see for subsidised theatre such as the National and the RSC?

The National's on to a good thing with the appointment of Richard Eyre. I went to see *Anthony and Cleopatra* the other day and I realised how much the building is really used. People are all over it. It's really accessible. Com-

"When *Tutti Frutti* came out from BBC Scotland, there was a lot of, "Good grief! Scotland has come up with something". But Scotland is full of wonderful playwrights, artists and poets'

pare this to the Barbican, which I hate. It's appalling to put actors and audiences in airport lounges.

You're involved in other things apart from the theatre. You compered CND's rally in Hyde Park last year. Do you have faith in Gorbachev's *glasnost*? I think it's extraordinary that there are now two Russian words in the English language: *glasnost* and *perestroika*. It's fantastically hopeful.

Next year I've been invited to go to Moscow and give a talk on 'The role of Soviet women given the effects of *glasnost*', which I know nothing about but I will find out, if I decide to do it.

What has been the most exciting thing for you this year?

Well, I'm afraid it's my new car. I had an old one but it was stolen so I've bought a 1969 MGB GT. It's cherry red with wire wheels, chrome bumpers, walnut dashboard and black leather interior with red piping and I love it.

Your new comedy series is out in the autumn. What can we expect?

It will be bits and pieces. My enthusiasms and my rages. I hope, above all, it will be original and that I get to wear a nice dress! •

Pain With Potter

The BBC received complaints from hundreds of people about the Dennis Potter series *The Singing Detective* last year. When the figures were presented to the public at the end of the year the *Daily Mail* felt able to report: 'Viewers slam BBC. The paper did not add that several million people had watched these challenging programmes and not complained.

Journalists don't watch much tv, except to use it as an occasional short-cut to information, because, at peak viewing times especially, they tend to be at work. Consequently, they are much less sophisticated than most of their own readers about the medium and they certainly have yet to cotton on to Dennis Potter's great achievement, which is to compromise not at all in his aspiration to create high art while working in a form that commands popular culture.

The series showed Michael Gambon - whose year it has been as well as Potter's - as a man suffering from a condition known as psoriatic arthropathy. This immensely painful skin condition (the same illness as Potter's own) includes among its effects the loss of the ability to control the body's temperature. When that happens, the sufferer hallucinates. Potter's hero, a writer of detective fiction, has his own detective work to do among his own nightmares, but the pay-off is not whodunnit so much as what-am-I?

The clues Potter's hero comes up with about his own life are all to do with betrayal - his mother's sexual betrayal of his father, his own childhood betrayal of an innocent classmate, the betrayal that sent him away to strangers in wartime, his wife's suspected betrayal with a film producer, the likelihood of his betrayal as a writer if one of his novels about a detective who is also

a crooner is bought for the cinema. And betrayal has been the theme, or at least the principal-among-equal-themes, to which Potter has returned over two decades.

Sometimes it is a betrayal of class, sometimes of country - the working-class boy who goes to Oxford, as Potter did, is more likely to be the former kind of hero as in the political plays about Nigel Barton; only the aristocracy betrays its country. And it is usually a two-way thing: the betrayer also feels betrayed, as if his own kin have put him at a distance.

Much of this is autobiographical in the sense that Potter derives much of his art from not being quite sure how far he identifies with his background - the self-contained, democratic but strict, chapel-going, boozing, singing, fighting, sporting, competitive, co-operating mining community.

The plays have become more obviously personal as time has eroded another of Potter's loyalties - to the Labour Party he once stood for in a general election and

whose politics he once believed would give him access to the things he wanted to say. On the face of it *The Singing Detective* had nothing to say about public matters. It was too deep in private pain.

But as Michael Gambon's Philip Marlowe sifted the clues that allowed him to put himself together again, he was doing what a whole generation of more-or-less idealists has had to do in the past 20 years. He was doing it via a complex, many-layered narrative and Potter trusted the audience to follow. And if that was not affirmation enough, Potter was underlining, through the broad and generalised emotion of the popular songs, the validity of the feelings expressed, however blandly, in a popular culture based on the desirability of love and innocent pleasure. He was rewarded with popular attention: it was only the likes of Mary Whitehouse who could see nothing but smut in a painfully moral, secular pilgrim's progress. •

Paul Allen



The Singing Detective: Deep in private pain