Scattered Across Time: Wagner’s Influence on the Contemporary Lyric in Musical Theatre

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for

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by

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This thesis is presented for the Honours degree in Theatre and Drama Studies at Murdoch University, 2012.

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Abstract

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Musical theory is a well-researched area of study which includes thematic devices such as leitmotivs, unfinished melodies, harmonic structure and many more in this vein. While he did not invent these concepts of musical theory, Richard Wagner’s creative advances and contributions to ‘Music Drama’ have greatly influenced musical theatre as we know it today. Wagner’s innovations in this area have led me to theorise that such musical devices can be applicable to the little studied area of lyrics. In order to explore this concept I have done a case study of Stephen Sondheim’s Into the Woods as well as experimented with the theories Wagner composed (in essays) by writing lyrics to two musicals: one an adaptation of Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night and another of my own devising via collaboration, Gesamtkunstwerk. By exploring an established lyricist's work, together with my own it is my purpose to demonstrate that lyrics can be studied from both a theoretical and a creative perspective and therefore can be respected by scholars and audiences alike.
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Introduction

Richard Wagner may be one of the world’s most well known composers, both for his unprecedented innovations to music theory and for his controversial personal life.¹ His history and his work are so well known it would seem strange to devote any extra time to studying his life, works or methods. Nevertheless, he is still an excellent source for progressive thinking in music, even after nearly two hundred years. There has been very little academic study into the lyric and libretto as a developing technique of storytelling and emotional resonance and so I turn to Wagner and how his concepts have developed naturally over time.

Wagner might have been more devoted to music as an art form as it was his area of greatest achievement, not the libretto, and yet despite this he made many advances in the area of libretto and wrote several essays on the importance of poetry and prose in a performance to create a full or ‘total’ piece of art. It is my intention to discuss Wagner’s essays relevant to the lyric and the concept of ‘total artwork’ and discover how his concepts have been developed to create Musical Theatre. I shall also look into what are generally considered ‘musical’ methods of creation and suggest how the can be translated into the libretto to create a more well-rounded form of musical theatre. I will give evidence of this taking place naturally through a case study of Stephen Sondheim’s musical Into the Woods.

Of the texts I used to inform my research there were several of specific value. This includes a collection of essays written by Richard Wagner throughout his life. The one which I used as a basis for my dissertation was The Artwork of the Future, written in 1849. It was from this text that I discovered Wagner’s theory of Artwork of the Future’ and the necessity for art to be ‘free’ to grow. My reading of this text refined my knowledge of the relationship between mankind and the artwork created

¹ Indeed, Wagner’s personal life was a sordid affair. He was kicked out of several countries, had affairs with many already married women and championed a campaign of hate against the Jews which, along with his music, made him a role model to Adolf Hitler. However, this does not negate his accomplishments as an artist and as it is not the purpose of this dissertation to either vilify or glorify the man there shall be few references to his personal life.
by man (or woman). I shall discuss Wagner’s theories found within his essays below and show how they can be developed for further use in modern day musicals.

As my focus is on Wagner and his life’s works I found much information to help me understand him as an artist through the works of Thomas May. His text, Decoding Wagner, gave me insight to what Wagner may have been thinking and how he came by his revolutionary ideas for the theatre. It also substantiated my theory that there was a link between Wagner’s opera’s and classical works such as Beowulf, Shakespeare and ancient Greek mythology. However, as I am also exploring the works of Stephen Sondheim I also looked at Scott McMillin’s book The Musical as Drama. This text links Wagner with modern musical theatre and gives an in-depth look at integration in musicals. This confirmed my theory that Wagner’s ‘artwork of the future’ has become an artwork of the present. The text gives great insight into the work of Stephen Sondheim and how he creates both the music and libretto for many of his shows. Finally, there was much insight to be found in Simon Yam’s dissertation: Music and the “Emotional Sublime” in Musical Theatre. This thesis highlighted for me the contrast between the focus of even contemporary academic work on the music of an extended work and the absence of such focus when engaging with the lyrics. It was Yam’s casual dismissal of the libretto as being of little importance which confirmed for me the idea that lyrics need to be brought to light as one of the three foremost works of art (according to Wagner). Lyrics make up a large portion of a musical theatre show, so they should be given due recognition as an important piece of art.