

The Wonders of the West End

SIERZ, Aleks: *Good Nights Out: A History of Popular British Theatre Since the Second World War*. Methuen Drama, 2021. 240 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1350200913.

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London's West End is a hub of artistic brilliance which captivates audiences from all levels of society, any visitor to London will attest to the awe-inspiring magnitude of publicity for the theatre district. Taking a stroll through the streets or a journey on the underground it is hard to avoid the bright marquees and billboards highlighting the latest productions. VisitBritain claims that 24% of all foreign visitors to London attend a West End show, proving that live performance is thriving with the West End taking an estimated gross revenue of £600 million in 2015. The review of this book taps into the wonderful world of West End theatre, shedding light into the moving trends of audiences and shows which may otherwise get lost in the archives.

Author and theatre critic Aleks Sierz has made several contributions to the research of drama, most prominently with his research into "in-er-face theatre." Sierz's other publications include *In-Yer-Face Theatre* (2001), *The Theatre of Martin Crimp* (2006), *John Osborne's Look Back in Anger* (2008) and *Rewriting the Nation* (2011). His latest book *Good Nights Out* (2021) examines London's renowned West End and celebrates the successes and techniques of this theatrical triumph. With meticulous attention to detail, Sierz embarks on a thematic survey of extraordinarily successful theatre productions and the crucial role they play in the national identity of Britain.

The introductory chapter serves as a solid foundation, offering a glimpse into the

themes and trends present in these productions. Sierz acknowledges that "success" is very much a moving goal post when shows are referred to by their stats, therefore the qualitative research in this book is beneficial. The book delves into the cross-media appeal of productions throughout this time, emphasising their ability to transcend the boundaries of the stage and extend their influence into television, cinema, and merchandising. This phenomenon contributes to theatres wide-ranging audience, encompassing individuals from diverse social classes and generating a new generation of theatre goers. The author also acknowledges a "tribal gathering" among spectators, fostering a sense of national identity and belonging.

Sierz brushes off the need to critique the creative team and chooses to decode the reason that such shows become monumental in British culture. Removing a critics want to pick fault and compare each show, Sierz sets to understand the joy that West End brings to its patrons and understand what keeps audiences returning for a *good night out*. I would highly recommend this book to those studying theatre or those who have an interest in the history of theatre, as this book examines each play and its significance to the social, economic, and political landscape with historical accuracy. *Good Nights Out* is structured with an introduction followed by seven chapters considered part of British identity: war, crime, sex, family, class, history, and fantasy. Each chapter has three adjectives which qualify the direction of discussion, the

chapters aim to justify the importance of the topic to British culture before examining four to five key pieces of commercially successful theatre within the given topic, highlighting the significance of the shows, and celebrating their successes.

War: Comic, Tragic and Nostalgic is the first chapter in which four of the plays discussed in the chapter date back to the decade following World War II; *While the Sun Shines* (1943), *Worm's Eye View* (1945), *Seagulls over Sorrento* (1950) and *Reluctant Heroes* (1950), though highly successful in their time are unlikely to be revived as they were very much of their time, where the chapter ends with *War Horse* (2007) a more commercially successful play. Sierz is keen to point out the escapism theatre patrons looked for post-war, with comedy being the most prolific genre. The author breaks down the components of a war play from characters to plot, noting British audiences are proud of their military might. Many British post-war plays tended to be patriotic, but far less so after the abolition of National Service in 1960 where plays tended to take a more critical look at the military, until the National Theatre's stage adaptation of Michael Morpurgo's *War Horse*. The tide had turned on the genre of war, and enough time had passed for history to be retold, which can be seen with the highly reviewed war musical *Operation Mincemeat* which opened in 2023. Chapters are littered with reviews and biographies of the writers and theatres to give readers an insight into why these plays were so significant, this also allows Sierz to talk about the importance of these plays in the economy of theatre. *War Horse* began life as a subsidised performance before transferring into the commercial sector and turning around £2.5million annual profit. The chapter mentions the National Theatre Live scheme in which productions were broadcast to cinemas, and more recently are accessible online for home broadcasting.

Chapter two is devoted to one of the nation's unusual obsessions' Crime: Classical, Farical and Post Modern. Murder mysteries are amongst the most popular theatre shows, and a favourite to perform by most Amateur Dramatics groups. The chapter covers *The*

Business of Murder (1981), *Sleuth* (1970), *Simple Spymen* (1958) and *The Mousetrap* (1952) which is the longest running show on the West End with nearly 29000 performances. Many consider crime plays formulaic, trapping people in an area where a crime has been committed and give each character a motive and an alibi, the skill of a good crime writer is to give the audience enough information to solve the riddle and leave with a superior feeling, without feeling cheated. When discussing the success of crime plays it is impossible to ignore the importance of Agatha Christie, the only female playwright to have three shows playing in the West End at the same time. This section comes steeped in the history of Christie and the development of the play from book to radio play, to stage play, to film. Despite the world knowing "the butler did it" audiences flock back thanks to the excellent dark humour and storytelling. Writers began to challenge the formulaic method with a new wave of self-aware plays in which the aim was not for the audience to sit back and relax, but to play the game as they try to second guess the writer at every turn; *Sleuth* is a prime example of this. Aside from *The Mousetrap*, crime does not bring in the audience it once did, even Martin McDonagh's play *The Pillowman* ran for less than 100 performances. It seems in the modern era crime is more likely to be a sub-genre as found in *Chicago: The Musical*.

The third chapter is entitled *Sex: Comic, Episodic and Ironic*, with only one of the plays in this chapter, *There's a Girl in My Soup* (1966), premiering before the abolition of stage censorship under The Theatre Act 1968. The abolition of stage censorship came only a year after the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the United Kingdom, which gave the writers licence to compose the oceans of stories left untold. This chapter also explores the merits of *Pyjama Tops* (1969), *Oh! Calcutta!* (1969) and *No Sex Please, We're British* (1971). The natural humour in Sierz's writing makes each page easy to read, whilst still full of information. Sex portrayed in the theatre has developed immensely since the 1960's, unlike continental Europe, British plays were constrained by tradition, all too aware of the influence on an

audience. Towards the end of the 1980's the popularity of shows loaded with sex and nudity took a downturn with the ease of access to pornography and the rise of feminism. One stark example of this would be Andrea Dunbar's *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (1982) which was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre, London before being commissioned into a film by Channel 4 in 1987; when this play is read with the current gaze it is a much darker tale of two school girls groomed by a married man. Whilst Sierz makes no judgements on overtly sexual performance overstepping the line of taste and decency, the discussion is in the context of acceptability of the time and gives readers the relevant information to arrive at their own conclusions.

The next genre of theatre ripe for analysis is *Family: Traditional, Redemptive and Fractured*, which tells of an audiences want for conflict and the drama that unfolds within a fractured household. Again, Sierz sets to find a universal equation to the genre amongst the successful shows "Family plays have to involve at least two generations, and they usually explore two types of tension: one is the balance of power between the parents, mother and father; the other is the generational struggle between the older family members and the younger ones." With this the four shows Sierz delves into are *Sailor, Beware!* (1955), *Spring and Port Wine* (1965), *The Man Most Likely to...* (1968) and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2012). Sierz explains there should be a lie or secret that when it is revealed the drama is allowed to unfurl. Post-war family plays focus on the problems in working class families as seen in *Sailor, Beware!* and *Spring and Port Wine*. Sierz discusses the reviews of *Spring and Port Wine* and the controversies there in, and how these controversies may have helped with ticket sales. The final play *The Curious Incident of the Dog in The Night-Time* is the most recent production covered in depth in this book. Based on the 2003 novel by Mark Haddon, this subchapter covers another National Theatre play which began life with Arts Council funding before transferring into the commercial sector gaining a record matching seven Olivier Awards. Sierz is keen to point out that the view

of "family life" in this 2012 play and others in the modern age is vastly different to the 1960's, a single fatherhood and a child with potential Aspergers syndrome is quite different to the nuclear family that he attempted to formulate earlier in the chapter.

Class: Musical, Parodic and Political is almost teased throughout the book with talk of lower-class families or the upper-class caught up in the sex plays. Class has become a label branded by the British as part of their identity, and with it comes the inherent class struggles. *Daisy Pulls It Off* (1983) and *Charlie Girl* (1965) show one class in society trying to fit into a new class, where both *Blood Brothers* (1983) the fifth longest running West End production and *Billy Elliot the Musical* (2005) show the class struggle inherent in Thatcher's Britain. Sierz details how playwrights respond to the political climate with theatre, especially true with *Billy Elliot* with an anti-Thatcher song remaining in the show even on the day of her death. The chapter references numerous musicals which deal with class struggles including *Oliver!*, *My Fair Lady* and *West Side Story*, allowing the audience to unwind in the stories of class through time.

The Phantom of the Opera (1986), *The Woman in Black* (1987), *The 39 Steps* (2006) and *One Man, Two Guvnors* (2011) are covered in *History: Gothic, Edwardian and Pastiche*. Whilst this chapter does not compile a myriad of history plays, it does review shows which are fictitious, set and remaining in the past. These plays offer the escapism Sierz talks about throughout this book, often set within the artistic framing of history and narratives, which are adaptations of works of fiction with contemporary alterations. *Phantom of the Opera* is the third most performed show in the West End produced by two of the biggest names in theatre; Andrew Lloyd Webber and Cameron Mackintosh. Sierz explores the creation and revivals of these plays and shows how a well told story can be such a commercial success, even when the shows themselves are recreations of existing stories such as *39 Steps* being a staging of an Alfred Hitchcock film or *The Phantom of the Opera* being an amalgamation of stories such as *Beauty and the Beast*, *Frankenstein* and *Don Giovanni*.

The closing chapter before summation is *Fantasy: Whimsy, Camp and Sci-fi*, the epitome of escapism, allowing audiences to leave the bounds of reality and enter the realm of fantasy. *Salad Days* (1954), *The Rocky Horror Show* (1973), *Return to the Forbidden Planet* (1989) and *Matilda the Musical* (2010) are the plays Sierz explores as “a place where pleasure knows no bounds.” Many recognise *The Rocky Horror Show* as a cult movie phenomenon though it began life as a West End success, its revival tours are numerous and have captured the imaginations of the audience who now dress up in wild clothing and shout standardised responses to the actors on stage. Sierz notices *Return to the Forbidden Planet* as the birth of the Jukebox musical opening the door for the likes of *Mamma Mia*, *We Will Rock You* and *Moulin Rouge!*

The West End continues to blossom and allow playwrights to display their greatest work with the likes of *Six* (2019), *Hamilton* (2017), *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (2016), *The*

Book of Mormon (2013) and *2:22* (2021) already making their mark on the world of Theatre. The domination of musicals in the West End in recent years has seen fewer original plays running for prolonged periods of time. One genre of writing which would be an interesting avenue for Sierz to analyse in more depth would be self-aware plays or plays-within-plays such as *The Play That Goes Wrong* (2014) with over 3000 performance and *Noises Off* (1982). The book is not in need of revision or correction at this stage, however the writing is very London-centric as though successful theatre cannot happen out of the city where many of the shows discussed have had monumentally successful tours in the UK and overseas.

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