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Jukebox-Musical: The State and Prospects

Olga-Lisa Monde

The Lee Strasberg Theatre & Film Institute, USA

1 Irving Place, P18D, New York, NY, 10003

PhD

E-mail: lmonde@rambler.ru

ABSTRACT. This article analyzes the concept of 'jukebox musical', classification of this kind of musical theatre productions, as well as those features which are characteristic for time of creation of these shows. During the last five decades there formed a whole separate area in musical theatre – the jukebox-musical, species of which may include: a musical essay, a musical concert, a musical drama, and a musical anthology. The importance of these productions for the world of music history is essential: they not only perpetuate the memory of some famous composers, singers, musicians, librettists, and lyricists, but also carefully preserve musical and vocal styles in relation to a particular historical period.

Keywords: jukebox musical; musical theatre; essay musical; concert musical; anthology musical; drama musical; rock opera.

INTRODUCTION. Jukebox musical is a production in which there is no original musical score, and which uses existing well-known music.

A jukebox is a name of a machine, which once used to play records of popular music. Having appeared in the late 80s of the XIX century, jukeboxes were widely used in restaurants, bars and cafes. In the 30–50s there were hundreds of thousands of them in the United States. Nowadays, having given way to more modern audio technologies, they become collectible, strongly evoking associations with the 'good old times' both among people of older generations, and young music fans.

The term 'jukebox musical' reflects, on one hand, the fact that the songs of an artist or a band, on which ones the musical is based, were popular and were among the most frequently ordered (paid) records in jukeboxes, and on the other it renders the meaning of 'an unforgettable, timeless hit', causing nostalgia and recognizing creative achievements of outstanding musicians, composers songwriters, and singers [1]. The plot can be autobiographical or invented, the characters – real or fictional. At the same time well-known songs and melodies are used for the score. The aim of creating such musicals is to extend lives of those musical works that once were hits of the time, but then, yielding place to newer ones, became forgotten.

Jukebox musicals of the end of the XX century primarily focused on the small audience and were intimate by nature [2]. Actors of small casts, working in a retro style with minimal scenery, tried to transfer the spectator to the time when outstanding musicians lived and worked. As examples we can name such musicals as: *Ain't Misbehavin* (1978) to the music of composer Fats Waller, *Five Guys Named Moe* (1992), based on songs by Louis Jordan, *Smokey Joe's Cafe* (1995), based on works of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, and *Dream* (1997), based on lyrics by Johnny Mercer. In a way they were intimate musical essays. But among them there were also full-scale productions in which a large number of artists were engaged, elaborate staging and expensive sets were used, and the choreography was set by recognized professionals. These include the *Bubblin Brown Sugar*¹ (1976), *Sophisticated Ladies*² (1981) and *Black and Blue*³ (1989). [2]. A distinctive feature of these works of the late 80s and early 90s is to strengthen the role of the plot. An example of successful, still-running productions of that kind are *Buddy – The Buddy Holly Story* (1990), the book for which was written by Alan Janes, and *Blondie* (2000).

Another group of jukebox musicals can be roughly formed from concert musicals, including pop and rock hits of past years. Some of these productions are semi-biographical, for example: *Beatlemania* (1977) and *Rain* (2010) – both of them are based on the works of the Beatles - *Eubie!*⁴ (1978), *Leader of the Pack*⁵ (1985) and *Jersey Boys* (2006). Examples of concert musical with a storyline, based on some biography, may be the following ones: *The Boy from Oz*⁶ (2003), and *Good Vibrations*⁷ (2005).

Of the following three productions, which will be reviewed later, we can say that they have opened a new chapter in the history of jukebox musical, having become in great demand and extremely successful worldwide.

The rock opera *Tommy*, carried out by theatrical director Des Makenaff together with the guitarist of rock band *The Who* Pete Townsend, opened on Broadway in 1993. The history of this project is not entirely typical for the concept of jukebox musicals. The fact is that the band *The Who*, founded in the early 60s of the last century, decided to write a rock opera for concert performance, having in view commercial promotion of their own songs. In the late 60's an album was released, and the presentation of the rock opera followed within a rock festival in 1969. Its final song *See Me, Feel Me* became a sensation, immediately changing the status of the band. A subsequent live recording and a film of the same name made it truly famous. However, a stage incarnation of the rock opera took place only a quarter of a century later, what makes it possible to call it a jukebox musical, since it is fully consistent with its definition. The Broadway production already has a run of more than one thousand performances, it also used to go on national, regional and international tours, and has won five Tony Awards. The album, recorded with the original cast, got the Grammy Award in the nomination for Best Theatre Production (1993).

Two West End works, the musical *Mamma Mia!* (1999) and the rock opera *We Will Rock You* (2002), continued the experience of creating productions, the plot of which is based on a specially written story that develops in accordance with the laws of drama. The book for the musical *Mamma Mia!* was written by Catherine Johnson, who selected a score of hits of the legendary Swedish group ABBA for its story, narrating of a young girl, Sophie, who wants to find her father, so that he would walk her down the aisle during her wedding. She does not know who he is, but suspects that he may be one of three men - former lovers to her mother. Musical *Mamma Mia!* has been translated into more than ten languages, the performances were held in 85 cities around the world and in total it has been seen by more than 20 million people. On the same principle – invented stories, and a large number of dances, - are based Billy Joel and Twyla Tharp's musical *Movin' Out* (2002), in which Billy Joel's songs are used, and another Tharp's musical *Come Fly Away*, based on songs by Frank Sinatra (2010) [2].

The rock opera *We Will Rock You*, based on the songs of *Queen* and named after one of them, was written by British playwright Ben Elton together with the musicians Brian May and Roger Taylor. And, although premiered at the West End, in the Dominion Theatre 10 years ago, the musical continues to run/ play on that stage even today. It has been translated into many languages and toured over many countries. The action takes place in Ga-Ga - the world of the future, where people are utterly depersonalized: all wear the same clothes, think the same way, have the same tastes, including music. A cultural product, consumed by society, is produced by mega-computers of Globalsoft Corporation, which seized power in that world. But in this society of 'welfare and happiness' there appears a group of rebels -Bohemians, representatives of creative young people who want to return the Golden Age in which 'live music used to be composed and performed by people, not machines'. There is a legend being passed on that that musical instruments, which existed previously for this purpose, are not all destroyed, and the main characters – Galileo, Scaramouche, Brit (an allusion to Britney Spears), and Meat (an allusion to Meat Loaf) – are sent to search for them. To this 'harmful' for the peace of the society initiative some powerful force is opposed, a symbol of dictatorship, existing in the world of Ga-Ga, the insidious Killer Queen. The show, full of adventures, ends with the victory of good over evil, as it should be in any decent fairy tale. Human feelings and unique individuality of each person get reinstated, and the prophecy of the revival of rock'n'roll, delivered at the beginning of the show by The Dreamer, the hero, who represents Freddie Mercury, is coming true. In this musical we clearly see the extrapolation of events of public life, which get manifested even more vividly in the American musical 'American Idiot'.

We would like to pay special attention to the jukebox musical, *American Idiot* (2010). During the long history of the Broadway musical a lot of attributes in advertising slogans were used: 'the most luxurious', 'the most expensive', 'the legendary', 'the most mysterious', 'the fastest', etc. But the phrase 'most outspoken' is probably not overused. So, what have such well-known American musical theater masters as Michael Mayer, a writer, Tom Kitt, a composer, an arranger, and an author of the orchestrations of songs by Billie Joe Armstrong, choreographer Steven Hoggett, and members of the popular rock band *Green Day* decided to tell absolutely frankly to their compatriots? They tell about the everyday life and its problems, about the youth, tired of TV rubbish, to refuse which seems quite impossible for them, as it is impossible to stop breathing, about lying politicians, and about empty fake smiles. In the musical theatre, as in a mirror, social changes are reflected, as well as the aesthetic expectations of the new ideals of the society, and the global challenges all people are concerned about. This is happening against the background of such characteristic features of the present life as failure of an individual to assess reality and to determine his/her place in it. A kind of 'syndrome of being lost'. The policy of double standards, the sophistication of advertising technologies, which let black to be called white and vice versa, all these give American society a surreal tinge, and the 'American dream' is increasingly getting recognized as some kind of utopia [3]. If in the nearly cult rock opera *We Will Rock You* we find a loss of music, human feelings, and personal identity, then in the rock opera *American Idiot* we see the threat of loss of any understanding or reason. At the same time in the actions of its characters, their deeds and thoughts, there are no rebellion and ideas, telling how and what should be changed. Only rock as the content of the musical performance determines the negative attitude of the youth as a part of the society to the ideology and the culture that are being propagated by the mass media, books, comics, movies, etc. The attitude is so negative because it is a road to *nowhere*, while a person needs to feel that he/she is a personality, not an 'idiot', which in Greek means being an ignorant creature, with poorly developed thinking and speech, while his/her desires and emotions are elementary and not amenable to correction. There is every reason to believe that this rock opera will not only be a monument to the band *Green Day*, erected during the lifetime of its musicians, but also a significant milestone in the history of musical theatre. This jukebox musical with the help of its rather 'loud' expressive means is trying to shout: 'Americans, stop! You are turning into idiots! We must do something!'. Therefore, the musical can be predicted a long life on the stage. However, hardly anyone will dare to suggest what measures and ways can be used to prevent and to treat the disease, called 'American idiotism'. Perhaps the answer will appear in one of newer jukebox drama musicals, which will allow to put acute questions and seek answers to them, accompanying the production with music and songs, familiar to millions of people (not just their fans) which certainly increases the degree of credibility of what is happening on stage. Our 'clip-like' consciousness receives a loading dose of energy-and-information cocktail, to the perception of which we are prepared by means of endless rotation of video clips on the screens. In *American Idiot* it is clearly evident: each song is accompanied with such series of visual supplement, built of constantly changing pictures.

We also should not forget one more category: anthology jukebox musicals. The plot here is not someone's story of life and work, and the musical is just a collection of works of the author, sometimes connected with a specific theme. Examples of the most successful works of this kind are "new" musicals by J. Gershwin *My One and Only* (1983) and *Crazy for You* (1992), in which one may hear songs of the composer that had success in his musicals of the 30's. The book of the musical *Crazy for You* was written by Ken Ludwig, the production was directed by Michael Okrent and choreographed by Susan Stroman. The staging enjoyed enormous success with the public [7; 4]. The same thing happened with music, written by Stephen Sondheim, on the basis of which there were created two musicals with new stories and characters: *Marry Me a Little* (1980) and *Putting It Together*⁸ (1999) [5]. The idea of an anthology musical was positively received by American theatre directors in small companies, aimed at off-off- and off-Broadway productions, as well as at regional touring. A good example of it can be the off-Broadway musical *Paris* (2011), based on works of Cole Porter.

Particularly noteworthy are jukebox musicals, based on the works of representatives of European musical culture. Thus, the musical *Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris* (1968) not only provided acquaintance with the works of the French author and singer for English-speaking audience, but also broke all records for duration of tours and number of revivals. Having

started as an off-Broadway musical, the show was staged practically on all largest and most prestigious stages of the United States, Canada, Australia, France, Ireland, Netherlands, and other countries. Today a musical about Jacques Brel continues to live in newer productions, the last of which took place in 2010. There is no doubt that this unique jukebox musical will celebrate its 45-year anniversary with dignity. The American musical *Pure Piaf: The life and Music of Edith Piaf* (2007), telling about the life and work of an outstanding French singer Edith Piaf, created by Alex Ryer, could be seen in theatres of different cities of France and other European countries in the course of several years.

This article does not pretend to analyze all known jukebox musicals. However, the above information allows us to conclude that a whole separate trend, named the jukebox musical, has been formed during the last several decades in the musical theatre, the species of which include: essay musical, concert musical, drama musical, and anthology musical. This phenomenon in itself can be called unique. The value of these productions for the world of music history is essential. Such works do not only perpetuate the memory of famous composers, singers, musicians, librettists, and lyricists, but also carefully preserve musical and vocal styles in relation to a particular historical period. For the most part, if the stories are biographical ones, it recreates the atmosphere of the exact time with the help of corresponding performing styles, as well as costumes, scenery, stage props, sound, special effects and other characteristics. Therefore, these jukebox musicals can rightly be called 'come-alive' pictures of musical history. Performances, an abstract plot of which is built on certain pieces of music, of course, serve the task of promoting the musical as a genre [6]. And we can confidently predict the expansion of interest of producers mainly in jukebox drama musicals, because it is in this form we can most successfully combine two main components of commercially successful productions: an obvious interest of the audience towards the music industry legends of XIX-XX centuries and "quality" libretto, which ones are to guarantee a win-win investment into expensive sets which are to make the show a most spectacular one.

Footnotes

¹ *Bubbling Brown Sugar* is a musical in the form of a revue; it is created by Lofton Mitchell and based on the idea of Rosetta LeNoir. The show consists of songs, which were popular in times of Harlem Renaissance (1920–1940), performed by Duke Ellington, Eubie Blake, Cab Calloway, Fats Waller. Original music, including the title song of *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, was written by pianist Emme Kemp. In 1976, the musical was nominated for a Tony Award as the "Best Musical of the Year" and also received a Laurence Olivier Award.

² The musical *Sophisticated Ladies* is based on the works of Duke Ellington and includes almost all hit songs of the King of Jazz - from the early period of his life till his death – and a number of lesser-known compositions.

³ The revue musical *Black and Blue* includes well-known songs, often heard in Paris between the First and Second World Wars and sung by William Christopher Handy, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Eubie Blake and others.

⁴ The musical *Eubie!* describes the creative life of James Blake (James Hubert Blake), 1887-1983, an American composer, librettist and pianist who worked in the style of ragtime, jazz and pop music. In 1921 he wrote the music for Broadway musical *Shuffle Along*.

⁵ Musical *Leader of the Pack* tells the story of life and work of Ellie Greenwich (Eleanor Louise "Ellie" Greenwich), 1940-2009, an American pop singer, songwriter and music producer.

⁶ The basis for the musical *The Boy from Oz* is a creative biography of Peter Allen David, born in 1956, an American writer and an author of humorous works, novels and scripts for video games.

⁷ Musical *Good Vibrations*, in the title of which the name of the eponymous song is used, is based on the creative legacy of the famous American rock band *The Beach Boys*.

⁸ *Putting It Together* is the title of the final number in Sondheim's musical *Sunday in the Park with George*, which was staged in New York at the Booth Theatre in 1984, and in 1990 its revival took place in London. The number reflects the main idea of the musical, the latter being a pointillistic picture of life, woven of many different threads and knots. It appeals to Georges Seurat's picture *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, which takes a significant place in the plot.

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Jukebox-мюзикл: состояние и перспективы

Монд Ольга-Лиза

Институт театра и кино Лии Страсберга, США
Кандидат педагогических наук, преподаватель
E-mail: lmonde@rambler.ru

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается понятие «мюзикл», классификация данного вида музыкального произведения, а также те особенности, которые являются характерными для времени, когда эти представления создавались. За последние пять десятилетий появилась отдельная область в музыкальном представлении – мюзикл, разновидности которого могут включать: музыкальный этюд, музыкальный концерт, музыкальную драму и музыкальный сборник. Эти произведения важны для мира музыкальной истории: они не только увековечивают память некоторых известных композиторов, певцов, музыкантов, либреттистов и поэтов-песенников, но, также, тщательно сохраняют музыкальные и вокальные стили в отношении определенного исторического периода.

Ключевые слова: мюзикл; музыкальное представление; музыкальный этюд; музыкальная драма; музыкальный сборник; рок-опера.