3. Cultural Barricades: Reading the West End Musicals

The idea of a British cultural “invasion” is not new and the rhetoric surrounding the arrival of musicals on Broadway from London’s West End draws on a long tradition of framing cultural exchange in competitive terms. While America led the rise of pop and rock music in the 1950s, the arrival of British pop music in the 1960s led to a sense of being beaten on home territory. Arnold Aronson points out that “the once dynamic American rock ‘n’roll had become lifeless and sentimental and was overwhelmed in 1964 by the so-called British invasion of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and others, as was the still vigorous rhythm and blues of Motown.”¹ Nor was this “invasion” limited to popular music. While post-war Britain was being colonized by American culture, American theatre audiences were exposed to British playwrights such as Harold Pinter, John Osborne, Tom Stoppard, Peter Shaffer, Arnold Wesker, Ann Jellicoe, Robert Bolt, and Edward Bond. Despite the growth of world-class American theatre companies and artists, shows with their origins in the West End or with major British companies such as the Royal National Theatre or the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) carry an automatic cultural cachet in America. David Savran notes that in relation to Britain “American theatre retains a colonized mentality” and he explains the prominent place of British drama on Broadway in the 1990s as a result of a deferential attitude: “It would seem that in a time of unprecedented confusion in the United States between high and low, British (or Anglo-Irish) drama appeals to producers, theatergoers, and critics alike because it brings a whiff of elite culture, a touch of class, to American theater.”²

With musicals, however, this deference has traditionally worked in the other direction and imported Broadway musicals have brought excitement, glamor, and innovation to the West End. However, in the 1980s and 90s, as one hit musical after another crossed the Atlantic from London, the supremacy of Broadway was severely challenged and New York critics...
voiced the ensuing sense of being besieged. In a 1986 article for the Sunday Times, Clive Barnes (the British-born theatre critic from the New York Post) discussed the new West End musicals not from an artistic standpoint but with regard to the threat they posed to Broadway’s reputation as the world capital of musical theatre: “The Broadway moguls’ greatest worry is, quite simply, the new British high-tech musical. These are seen here as a threat to the already ailing Broadway musical.”3 In the Cambridge History of American Theatre, Laurence Maslon recalls the joyous celebrations in 1983 when A Chorus Line became the longest running musical on Broadway and the occasion was marked by a stunning gala performance involving hundreds of ex-cast members. When Cats assumed the mantle 15 years later, the reactions were muted at best:

On 18 June 1997, when Cats became the longest running Broadway show of all time, there was little professional enthusiasm for celebrating a landmark that overturned A Chorus Line, the quintessential Broadway musical. In marked contrast to that show’s extraordinary celebration in 1983, Cats merely roped off the street in front of the Winter Garden for some speeches and a small parade.4

The prevailing feeling on Broadway is summed up succinctly by Jack Viertel. Viertel, an ex-theatre critic and dramaturg, is currently the creative director of the Jujamcyn Organization (one of the three large Broadway theatre owners and producers) and the artistic director of Encores!, which presents meticulously researched staged readings of rarely performed musicals.5 While offering reasons why he personally did not take to the West End musicals, he acknowledges that the reaction of the New York theatre industry was not entirely objective: “I think that on the street there was a combination of resentment and admiration . . . there was a tremendous sense that these shows were a step backwards from Prince and Sondheim’s best work and the fact that they were more popular than any of our shows turned everyone into a sore loser.”6 Viertel did not enjoy most of the London musicals, but he acknowledges frankly that “I will go to my grave not knowing whether that’s resentment or taste.”

CRITICAL RECEPTIONS

These feelings of resentment may partly explain the unnecessarily flippant and dismissive tone of some of the New York theatre critics in evaluating the West End musicals. The most popular approach was to sideline the artistic merits of the piece by depicting the shows as technical spectacles in which