

Eternity's worth waiting for

The lyricist on the key to a good musical, why cricket can give you an all-round education and the iniquity of wind farms

NEXT month, Sir Tim Rice's first new musical for more than a decade, *From Here To Eternity*, opens in the West End. He never intended writing it, but a friend, Stuart Brayson, would send him songs he had written. 'He must have sent me 10 or 12 shows, a couple of which did get put on. Then, he sent me some songs based on *From Here To Eternity*, and they were the best he'd done.' As Mr Brayson didn't have the rights to the 1951 novel, Sir Tim 'half-heartedly' tracked them down. Two years and \$40,000 later, he'd bought them, 'so I was kinda involved'. He's now lyricist and co-producer.

Sir Tim doesn't relish the business side. 'I went to a production meeting yesterday and barely understood a word. It was all about whether we should rake the theatre 1 in 30 or 1 in 35, and something about how many lights should be facing... Oh I don't know, it was all beyond me,' he laughs. 'I much preferred the old days when I wrote some lyrics, turned up on opening night and had a hit.'

When the book for the musical was written, some of the songs no longer fitted, so Sir Tim agreed to pen 'five or six' new ones. Then, as the style had to be consistent, he was asked to rewrite virtually all of the lyrics. 'Stuart's were very good, but they weren't theatrical and there is a difference. I often wish I could write great rock lyrics, but I can't—however, I can do reasonable lyrics within the context of a show. There are people who can write good tunes, but few who can do theatrical lyrics—they don't rhyme, they don't scan, they don't make sense.'

As a child, Sir Tim published a 'spooif music magazine'. Later, he wrote 'some songs with three

chords, one of which was recorded by an unknown band and I think finished off their career. I was unimaginative and thought in life you had to work at something you don't like while you did things you did like in your spare time'. On leaving school, he joined a law firm and did just that, before working for a record company and, famously, meeting Andrew Lloyd Webber.

Some people can write good tunes but few can do theatrical lyrics

'Andrew wanted to write for the theatre, which hadn't really crossed my mind. I loved Flanders and Swann, and Rodgers and Hammerstein, but I'd hardly ever seen a show. A lot of my life has been a result of chance and coincidence. I often think I'll had not met Andrew, would I have done something else in writing?'

This slightly random approach to his career hasn't left him with any professional regrets, although he says: 'When Andrew was

having hits with *Cats* and *Phantom of the Opera*, and I was having flops—well one flop, *Blondel*, as *Chess* only flopped in America—I did wonder if I should've stayed with him.'

He's been 'half-working' for several years on a musical about Machiavelli, which he might do as a drama instead: 'I'd quite like to do a play, just to see if I could'. Some subjects are more suited to different formats, he believes. 'A play about Eva Perón would have been unlikely to attract the interest that *Evita* the musical did. Not only did it have a linear story—local girl makes good, dies—but she was over the top, showbiz, shallow in some respects and yet glamorous, and all these apply to musicals as well.'

He adds: 'The key isn't the music, but a great, clear story. That's why a lot of jukebox musicals don't succeed—they don't have a good story, however good the music might be.'

Sir Tim has also been writing for his cricket side, the *Heartaches*, which he's run for 40 years; he records each season in a self-published mini-version of *Wisden*. 'Would you like one?' he asks eagerly. 'Do you like cricket at all?' (I do.)

Sir Tim Rice

From Here To Eternity opens on October 23 (previews from September 30) at the Shaftesbury Theatre, London WC2 (020-7379 5399; www.shaftesburytheatre.com)

Where is your favourite place in Britain? Helford, Cornwall

What is your favourite building? A cathedral

Book? *Just William* (Richmal Crompton) or *Tremendous Trifle* (G. K. Chesterton)

Music? *Mystery Train* (Elvis Presley)

Food? Bacon sandwich

Holiday? Sydney, Australia

Who is your hero? Peter Cook and Ronald Reagan

Alternative career? Book publisher or travel agent

He gets the first annual down from the shelves in his next study, opens it and starts reading extracts to me, and then mainly to himself, lost in seasons past. 'All out 28. We were bad in those days. Rice 4... Hmm.' Aged 68, he still plays, despite a dodgy knee, and has a policy of only fielding balls that come directly to him.

One of the reasons Sir Tim hasn't written a musical for so long is his involvement with MCC, sitting on the committee and serving as president. 'I've always loved sport, although I've never been very good at it, other than swimming. I always encourage kids to get into cricket as, apart from the sheer sport, fresh air and exercise aspect, it teaches you so many things—mathematics, history, geography. The language and literature of cricket is so good. Cricket covers so many areas of British and international culture.'

Once a high-profile supporter of the Conservative Party, Sir Tim's ire at its wind-farm policy has made him unsure how he will vote. 'Wind farms are one of the most dishonest scams perpetuated by any organisation ever. They don't work, are hideous to look at, destroy birds and bats, are bad for people's health and put up people's bills.'

He continues: 'We have some land in Scotland and we were asked to put wind turbines on it. I could have made \$1 million or more out of it with all the grants and so forth—it's an absolute racket.'

As I leave, I wish him luck with the musical. He thanks me and replies: 'I would really love it to be a hit for Stuart almost more than for me—there's a desperate lack of good new British musical-theatre writers.'
Roderick Eastdale

