

Arts

It could be the plot of a tear-jerking musical. A nervous young man sidles up to a wealthy music titan of middle years and tentatively introduces himself. They have nothing in common beyond a love of corny pop. And yet, aeons on, the young man now himself in middle age and the wealthy titan an even wealthier pensioner, have written a musical together, and it's on in the West End, and the hope is that it will run from here to eternity.

Whether this true story has a happy ending remains to be seen. But, yes, the world-famous lyricist Sir Tim Rice has turned *From Here to Eternity* into a musical with a composer nobody has heard of. His previous collaborators have all been outright megastars. But forget Lloyd Webber, Elton John and Abba's Benny and Björn, and instead make the acquaintance of Stuart Brayson, aged 48, of Gateshead.

"Corny though it may sound," says Sir Tim, "I just want to work with people whose music I admire. It happens that the previous people I've worked with have been quite well known. And it happens that Stuart is not at the moment, but he will be." Fighting talk. If the subject of this encomium is wondering how he came to be opening a West End musical with the lyricist of *Joseph, Jesus Christ Superstar, Evita, Chess* and *The Lion King*, he's managing the vertigo well.

"Working with Tim almost feels like it's meant to be," Brayson says. The accent is pure Geordie. "I didn't plan it but I'm so happy because he's as good as everybody says he is. Also he's a really lovely guy." "Don't put that in," says Sir Tim.

Certainly, Rice's thirst for novelty in musical theatre is as keen as ever, and he has little time for shows that merely plunder famous artists' back-catalogues. "The key isn't the music, but a great, clear story," he told *Country Life* magazine recently. "That's why a lot of jukebox musicals don't succeed – they don't have a good story, however good the music might be... There's a desperate lack of good new British musical-theatre writers."

And so to this unlikely new double-act. They met in the late Eighties, when Brayson, then 22, was fronting a band called Pop. He spotted Rice across a crowded room. "I went up to him and said, 'Don't worry, I'm not going to pester you but I would just like your opinion on a song. Have you got your car with you?'"

Sir Tim did not back away but neither did he expect the earth to move. "Stuart gave me a cassette, which shows you how long ago it was, and I put it in the car driving home. I get sent a lot of stuff and most of it's not very good but this actually was. The style was a bit Duran-y. I must have rung up and said, 'Have you got any more?'"

More cassettes soon arrived, in a range of musical genres. And Brayson, duly encouraged, tacked across from pop to musicals. Writing the words as well as the music, his first, *The Boy Who Wanted More*, was about "my experience of the pop business". Needless to say, he sent them all to his mentor, although Sir Tim's globetrotting meant he never quite got up north to see them.

"I still have a row of CDs of Stuart's shows," says Sir Tim. "Great variety of subjects. There was one on northern

miners, Byron, Oscar Wilde, one on Wall Street." Then, in 2002, Brayson scored a version of *From Here to Eternity* and Rice pricked up his ears. "I said, 'This could be it. Have you got the rights?' And Stuart said, 'Rights?'"

The title is familiar to those who love their swooning romantic Forties movies. *From Here to Eternity* is set in Hawaii as Pearl Harbor looms. Deborah Kerr clinches burly Burt Lancaster in the surf, while Montgomery Clift boxes and bugles and Frank Sinatra looks on. Only this isn't the musical version of the film. Instead, after knocking on doors in Hollywood, Rice ended up in New York meeting the daughter of James Jones, author of the original 900-page doorstopper from which



CLARA MOLDEN

Tim Rice: after Andrew and Elton, meet Stuart

Renowned lyricist Tim Rice and unknown composer Stuart Brayson tell Jasper Rees why they have teamed up to turn 'From Here to Eternity' into a musical



Double act: Tim Rice and Stuart Brayson, top, and the cast of 'From Here to Eternity', based not on the movie but the original novel

the film was adapted. What the musical isolates are the novel's stories of two doomed soldiers in the shadow of war: Sergeant Warden, who falls in love with a woman unhappily married to his superior, and the idealistic loner Pruitt.

Rice wasn't planning to get involved as a creator. He was going to produce. But once they'd recorded a demo with West End singers and invited aboard Rice's pal Bill Oakes to write the storybook and Tamara Harvey to direct, a lot of songs in Brayson's prototype didn't quite fit the new storyline. There were holes where songs should be.

"To cut a long story short, I ended up doing about 90 per cent of the lyrics," says Sir Tim. "Quite a few of my titles were still there," volunteers Brayson.

"Absolutely! I got inspiration to do what I immodestly think is some good work through Stuart's titles." Those titles include the opener *G Company Blues* and *Love Me Forever Today* aka "Burt Lancaster's first song". "I never wanted to do another show. What's encouraging to me is that in a way despite my lack of enthusiasm to be involved, it's happened."

As for the music, the soundscape of *From Here to Eternity* straddles two eras. Swing is associated with the older characters, blues with the younger ones. "When I started it I think I was ahead of all the Amy Winehouse Forties revival thing," says Brayson. "You have the world of Glenn Miller or Tommy Dorsey, the big band, which is more Warden's musical landscape. But you also have Pruitt, who I see as Elvis's older brother. He's on the cusp of something. Then you've got the Hawaiian backdrop and the military. So all of these worlds are colliding."

It is curious meeting two collaborators of such unequal renown. The discrepancy in stature is accentuated by their appearance – Rice fills a room with height and girth and shiny blue eyes, while Brayson is a wiry whippet in specs. Even

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Stuart gave me a cassette of his music, which I put in the car. 'Got any more?' I asked

he didn't imagine such a day would ever dawn. "From the day I met him I wanted to work with him, let's be honest. But I don't think when we first met he thought, this guy's going to write musicals. I was a rock'n'roller."

"And you were only 22," says Sir Tim. "Not that you can't do it at 22." Well quite. Another composer was a mere teenager when Rice first fruitfully collaborated with him on *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. By coincidence Andrew Lloyd Webber happens to have a new show opening in the same West End season. *Stephen Ward*, based on the Profumo affair, is written with his *Sunset Boulevard* collaborators Christopher Hampton and Don Black.

"I know nothing about it beyond the subject matter," says Sir Tim. "It might get us a bit of publicity. 'Webber and Rice back in the West End, but not together!' *Chess* came out at the same time as *Phantom* and *Phantom* was a vastly more commercial success. I thought at the time, well he's obviously better at this job than I am. But *Chess* has its spot. Probably when I'm dead someone will do a brilliant version of it. The thing I have to remember is that my name doesn't really sell huge amounts of tickets. Nor does Andrew's for that matter."

"Mine sells a lot in the North East," deadpans Brayson. "Unfortunately, we're in the West End."

'From Here to Eternity' previews at the Shaftesbury Theatre from Sept 30. Details: fromheretoeternitythemusical.com