

# Tim Rice: How to get ahead in musicals

## My accident-prone journey from *Evita* to *From Here to Eternity*

0 Comments Tim Rice 19 October 2013

Like almost everyone else in the insane world of musical theatre, I don't know how to create a hit. This hasn't prevented me from contributing to, even originating, some. Most of these successes have come about by happy accident and could so easily have been disasters or stillborn but for matters or events beyond my control or totally unexpected. I suppose I could arrogantly claim that there was usually some artistic merit to the shows that did make it (and little to those that eventually flopped) but there must be many writers with wonderful musical ideas out there who have never had that vital unpredictable break. Like Napoleon, we all need lucky generals.

Perhaps my greatest piece of good fortune (apart from meeting Andrew Lloyd Webber in the first place) was the initial universal rejection of *Jesus Christ Superstar* by West End theatre producers, indeed by theatre producers anywhere. There were no takers within the ranks of the Cameron Mackintoshes of the day (which, in 1969, did not include Cameron Mackintosh) for a musical about the last seven days in the life of Jesus, as seen through the eyes of Judas Iscariot. The only interest anyone showed in *Superstar* came from Brian Brolly, who had just launched the newly formed UK arm of the American record giant MCA.

As a second best, Andrew Lloyd Webber and I settled for a record — a cast album of a show that didn't exist. Restricted by the dimensions of a vinyl double album and without the need to worry about staging, size of orchestra or cast, and needing to make the music appeal in the first instance to record-buyers rather than to theatregoers, we created a debut version of our work some way removed from how we had originally imagined it on stage. For starters, we ditched any plan to have spoken dialogue — on record that would become unbearable after one play, so *Superstar* became a sung-through piece, non-stop music, billed as a rock opera. And not too long.



*Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd-Webber holding their gold and platinum records for their album 'Jesus Christ Superstar'. Photo: Getty*

Had some far-sighted producer fancied *Superstar* in 1969, we almost certainly would have opened for a trial run at a provincial theatre. The forces at our disposal would have been modest

— maybe 15 musicians in the pit with virtually no rock elements. We would have struggled to afford 12 apostles, let alone the crowds of 50,000 that we were able to portray on the album. The director would doubtless have rewritten chunks of the script to accommodate problems with timing, scenery and/or actors — in the recording studio we had total control of our work. The show would have been ten minutes too long. We would have been lucky to have made it from there to the West End, at best becoming a wacky footnote in British musical history. At the end of 1969 we issued one single from the score, the song ‘Superstar’, sung by Murray Head as Judas. The complete album followed a year later and took the record charts by storm, notably in America. Not only were we appreciated by the record-buying public, within the theatre business we were hailed as marketing geniuses for putting out the score of a show before the show itself — and our accidental brilliance indeed enabled *Superstar* to be a thumping great hit on stages all over the world.



*Jesus Christ*

*Superstar’ at the Palace Theatre, London, 1972 Photo: Getty*

I have no idea whether we would have ever repeated that success had I not been late for a dinner in London in 1973. Hopelessly lost, driving around the backstreets of Chelsea, I caught the first few minutes of a programme that told the story of Eva Perón, a lady about whom I knew little more than that she was from Argentina, glamorous and dead. Even that was more than most people, certainly of my generation, in Britain knew about her at the time. I remembered her from my schoolboy stamp collection. I managed to hear the complete programme a few days later and felt that Evita’s story could be the perfect subject for our next extravaganza. The fact that another radio show in the same series about icons of the mid-20th century featured James Dean clinched it for me. Satnav would have denied the world *Evita*.

When I worked for the Disney studios in the 1990s, my first assignment was an animated feature film, initially entitled *King of the Jungle*, about a lion cub whose wicked uncle murders his father

— *Hamlet* with fur. I had been working on this project for only a few months when I was asked to switch my priorities to another Disney animated movie that was much further down the road — *Aladdin*. The brilliant lyricist for that picture was Howard Ashman, who with composer Alan Menken had played a huge part in reviving the Disney studios animation fortunes with *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*. They were now working together on *Aladdin*, which looked certain to give them and Disney a third consecutive smash hit.

But the great Howard Ashman had become desperately ill and was never able to complete the work he had started on *Aladdin*. Songs were still needed, in particular the central romantic ballad, and, as the bloke on their block, Disney rushed me into the lyricist's chair to work with Alan Menken. One of the songs that we wrote together, 'A Whole New World', became a massive hit, a number one in America, winning a bunch of awards, including an Oscar. The acceptance of these mementoes was bitter-sweet in that I knew perfectly well that Howard would, indeed should, have been there in my place. *Aladdin* opens as a stage show on Broadway next year, with 'A Whole New World', not an Ashman-Menken showstopper, as the big magic-carpet ride number.



Rebecca

*Thornhill and Robert Lonsdale star in From Here to Eternity*

And now I am heading back to the West End, in the role of producer, as well as lyricist, with a musical version of James Jones's magnificent 1951 novel *From Here to Eternity*, made into a Oscar-winning film by Fred Zinnemann two years later. The composer is a new name on Shaftesbury Avenue — Stuart Brayson. He and I met in the early 1980s when he recognised me in the street and handed me a tape of some pop songs he had written. That chance encounter has finally led to his West End debut and my return thence after 13 years.

Of course every career in every field owes a great deal to fortune and to the unexpected, but in the wildly unpredictable world of entertainment this is truer than in most callings. I never know how to advise those starting out in theatre, film or music. Hang around streets with a CD of your work? Take an idea for a book to a publisher who didn't like it but suggests you meet a young

composer he knows who's looking for a collaborator? That's how I met Andrew, but I don't tell would-be Sondheims to take a bad manuscript to a literary agent.

*From Here to Eternity* is previewing at the Shaftesbury Theatre and opens on 23 October. Tim Rice has written musicals with, among others, Andrew Lloyd Webber, the Disney Corporation and Björn Alvaeus and Benny Andersson of Abba.

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