

Tim Rice's Musical 'From Here to Eternity' to Open in London

Grittier West End version of famous 1953 film features violence amid song and dance numbers

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He's told the story of Jesus Christ, Evita Peron, and Simba the Lion King. Now Tim Rice is going for steamier fare—the famous roll in the sand between Deborah Kerr and Burt Lancaster.

The musical version of "From Here to Eternity," produced and with lyrics by Mr. Rice, opens on London's West End on Oct. 23, setting one of America's most familiar films to song and dance. Depending on reviews, it may wash ashore stateside.

The movie tells the story of a company of soldiers stationed in Hawaii in the weeks before the attack on Pearl Harbor. It was sensational at the time for depicting the harsh realities of army life, instead of glorifying it. It also shocked audiences by showing a scantily-clad Ms. Kerr locked in embrace with hunky Mr. Lancaster on the beach.

The musical adaptation—from the 1951 James Jones' book, not the Oscar-winning 1953 film—will include all the grittier elements that didn't make it past censors in a postwar America. Private Maggio, (the part that won Frank Sinatra an Oscar in the film,) is a male hustler, not just a loudmouth drunk. Lorene, played by Donna Reed, is a prostitute, not a dance hall hostess. There is plenty of choreographed violence. Oh, and everyone sings and dances.

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Helen Maybanks

Tim Rice

"It's a great story, and story is king," says Mr. Rice, who says he veers between thinking he's quite smart and insane for taking on the new musical, his first in 13 years.

With Andrew Lloyd Webber, Mr. Rice created some of the most important modern musicals: "Evita," "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," and "Jesus Christ Superstar." He then went on to write lyrics for Disney's "The Lion King" and "Beauty and the Beast."

"To be honest, I thought, 'Well I've had a jolly good run but I don't need to do anything else,'" says Mr. Rice, 68. "It's risky because if it dies, people will say, 'Oh, we always knew he was crap.'"

He had no plans to work on "From Here to Eternity." An unknown composer named Stuart Brayson wrote the music. The two met almost 30 years ago when Mr. Brayson, who described himself as "a frustrated David Bowie" at the time, recognized Mr. Rice on the street and slipped him a cassette of his music. Mr. Rice actually listened to it, and liked it. The two struck up a friendship.

"Over the years, he sent me tons of stuff, but when he sent 'From Here to Eternity,' I said, 'Well this is actually good,' says Mr. Rice.

But when Mr. Rice asked Mr. Brayson if he had the rights to the book, Mr. Brayson replied: 'Rights?'

Mr. Rice, who was thinking at this point that he would act as a producer on the show, said he'd help. He met with James Jones' daughter, Kaylie, a writer who lives in New York. She wasn't thrilled with the idea. "I'm not a fan of musical theater in the first place," she said. But she liked Mr. Brayson's songs, and she liked Mr. Rice, who flew from London to meet her in person. She was concerned that the musical would gloss over the grittier aspects of her father's work, as the film had. Her father, who died in 1977, had never liked the movie. "I wanted my father to be happy with this version," she said.

Mr. Rice assured her they would welcome her input. In some ways a musical made sense, she realized. The soldiers, she said, "were bound together by music. The one thing they had in common was the blues."

The score adheres to her wishes: It is heavy on blues and swing, with "an element of rock-n-roll, which is just over the horizon," says Mr. Rice.

Ms. Jones also sent her friend, former U.S. Marine Ray Elliott, who was the head of the James Jones Literary society, to advise the cast on proper military protocol. Mr. Elliott ran cadence drills, taught the actors how to hold their rifles, and how to properly

salute and address officers and noncommissioned officers. He went through the script and ensured it would pass muster with actual soldiers.

After running drills with the company for two days, Mr. Elliott says he was satisfied. "They are professional dancers and actors, so they picked it up pretty quickly," he says. "I told them they would make good soldiers."