Entertainment tourism: Musicals at the Stratford Festival in Canada

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ABSTRACT
Many cities in Canada show their colonial heritage in their names. Stratford, Ontario was named for its English counterpart, and both have Avon Rivers and world-renowned theatre festivals featuring the works of Shakespeare. Canada’s Stratford is fairly close to Toronto and major cities over the US border, including Buffalo and Detroit. The Stratford Festival has brought tourists to the small city of 30,500 for more than fifty years. As the centre of Canadian classical theatre, the Festival tends to focus on works by Shakespeare, Molière, Sophocles and other well-known authors in addition to plays by established Canadian playwrights. In its early seasons, operettas by Gilbert and Sullivan and comic operas such as Mozart’s The marriage of Figaro and Cosí fan tutte were also included in the Festival. However, in recent decades, comic opera has all but disappeared; its place in the repertoire has been supplanted by musicals. Initially, given the nature of the Festival, the musicals were tied to Shakespearean themes (e.g. West side story and Kiss me, Kate) but as musical theatre proved to be an excellent commercial and tourist draw, more and varied musicals were included in the subsequent seasons. This paper will examine the place of musicals at the Stratford Festival in Canada. I will question how the inclusion of musicals changed the nature of the Festival, the types of audiences and the tourism associated with the Festival.

KEYWORDS: musicals; Stratford; festival; Canada; tourism; entertainment.
ENTERTAINMENT TOURISM

The Stratford Shakespeare Festival’s current artistic director, Des McAnuff, makes the lofty claim that Stratford is the best place in the world to come if you love theatre (see *Stratford Festival* 2011), but sixty years ago, the idea of a renowned Canadian theatre company was somewhat laughable. Like many other towns in Ontario, Stratford was settled by British immigrants and named for a British town. To honour the Canadian Stratford’s relationship with Shakespeare, local Tom Patterson dreamt of creating a Shakespearean Festival from the time he was a young man. In accordance with this ideal, Patterson determined that a British director and British classically trained actors could best lead a company of Canadians in the art of Shakespearean repertoire. Tyrone Guthrie thus became artistic director with enthusiasm for the opportunity to create Shakespearean productions in a city without entrenched traditions about the way Shakespeare should be done. Guthrie brought on Tanya Moiseiwitsch to design a thrust stage in the Elizabethan tradition. Alec Guinness brought star power and experience to the Festival’s first season in 1953. Moiseiwitsch’s innovative stage design was a semi-permanent structure housed under a giant tent that was taken down at the end of each season and raised in a picnic-like atmosphere by the townspeople for the next three summers.

The Stratford Shakespearean Festival was consciously created to facilitate a festive atmosphere. Picard and Robinson (2006, p. 1) wrote in their book *Festivals, tourism and social change* that “the concentrated time-space frame of the festival helped to make visible the social life of ‘foreign’ townscapes and landscapes”. Guthrie promoted the idea of a tent as a perfect venue for its ability to create a fair-like, celebratory and intentionally temporary and thus special place. The plethora of bed and breakfasts that sprang up as the Festival became more established encouraged visitors to stay for a night or more, to take in multiple plays and wander around the town. Tourists at the Festival often stayed overnight and spent time and money in Stratford and the surrounding region, leading to the prosperity of the area, especially in the hospitality, restaurant and retail sectors.

Further, there was a conception early on that people visiting Stratford were not tourists – they were visitors, attending a cultural event and would be welcomed as such. Tom Patterson describes the distinction in his book *First stages*,

That was one of our smartest moves. Right from the beginning, we decided that we would not call anyone a ‘tourist’. They were, rather, ‘Festival guests’. All our advertising read that it was our obligation to look after ‘our Festival guests’. And this created the attitude among Stratford people that ‘these people are our guests. We’ve got to look after them’. (Patterson and Gould 1987, p. 149)

The bed and breakfast culture in Stratford helps to create the sense of being a guest. With many people returning year after year for the Festival and to the same bed and breakfasts and restaurants, friendships and relationships are formed between Stratford natives and their “guests” that go beyond usual local/tourist relationships.
Where does music enter this discussion? Well, as Tom Patterson (ibid., pp. 203-204) explained,

Louis Applebaum had been retained by Tyrone Guthrie as composer for the incidental music for the plays and for the fanfare that still heralds each performance. He also conducted the orchestra after the Festival opened. But at the same time, although no one knew it, [and] with practically no time at all to organize, [he] miraculously came up with sixteen afternoon concerts featuring such budding stars as Glenn Gould, Jan Rubes, Lois Marshall.

Music, in those first few years, was somewhat peripheral to the goings on of the theatre company. Yet, because of Applebaum’s association with the Festival, the concert series developed into something quite remarkable. Guthrie was a vocal supporter of Applebaum’s initiatives in creating a music festival and wrote him a letter of support in 1955 saying: “For a year or two, the Shakespeare plays may have to carry the music. Later, I suspect that the boot will be on the other foot” (cited in Pitman 2002, p. 108). As Guthrie predicted, the music festival took a loss for the first few years, but it wasn’t long before Applebaum hit on a formula for drawing talent and audiences to the concerts, and eventually, the musicals at Stratford were able to finance lesser-known plays.

It wasn’t until Michael Langham took over as artistic director in 1956, that a musical dramatic form was included in the Festival offerings. Benjamin Britten’s The rape of Lucretia was directed by Applebaum, who wrote in the house program,

Stratford’s presentation will, we expect, aim the attention of the audience on the essential dramatic and musical values of the work rather than divert it with the conventional operatic trimmings and trappings... Time and our audience should eventually let us know what to build on. (Applebaum 1956)

The following year, Britten himself conducted his Turn of the screw at Stratford. Starting in 1956, jazz greats Duke Ellington, Oscar Peterson and Art Tatum took part in the music concert series, finally drawing crowds in significant numbers and helping to legitimize jazz as an art form in the country. Thus, the Festival started its foray into music with incidental music in the plays, music concerts and with modern opera.

The Britten operas were less well attended than the jazz concerts and it wasn’t long before lighter musico-dramatic works were staged. Guthrie, despite his derisive stance on musicals as “girlie-girlie shows,” appreciated operetta, and he directed the first Gilbert and Sullivan production at the Festival in 1959 – H.M.S. Pinafore. It was a great success and the late 1950s and early 1960s were dedicated to operetta (see Table 1).
Table 1: Staged musical offerings at the Stratford Festival by year.

In a review of the 1963 Festival offerings, author Graham George (1964, p. 37) wrote:

The lesson seemed to be that the public thought of Stratford as a festival of theatre, but it was going to be choosy about what musical theatre it would attend. No Britten, despite his reputation as high as his brow; no Beggar’s opera, despite its racy style and venerable age, but yes to G&S, despite its amateur associations […] it is the drama festival that all Canada is proud of and all the world comes to see. Music – The marriage of Figaro gloriously excepted – still limps doggedly behind.

Perhaps it was opinion pieces like this that prompted the Stratford Festival under artistic director Jean Gascon, to attempt an opera festival to match the Shakespearian productions. In 1963, the Festival bought the Avon Theatre; a theatre, Gascon wrote, that was renovated “with a specific purpose in mind: to be the home of
an opera festival on the same scope as the drama festival, which already ranks as among the best known in the western world” (Stratford Festival 1964).

The ambitious plan of an opera festival never really found its footing; in 1970 and 1971 there were no operas staged at all. The musicals in these years tended to be modern, sometimes experimental works with music by Canadian composers that were housed in smaller theatres, yet still failed to fill all the seats. When Robin Phillips took over as artistic director, he continued the trend of mounting more experimental works and produced three operas in his first year. There was a dry spell of two years for music on stage as Phillips refocused the Company’s attention on works by Shakespeare – drawing crowds with stars like Maggie Smith. Bernstein’s Candide was part of the 1978 season, proving to be a bridge between operatic and musical genres. The dream of creating an opera festival to match the renown of the Shakespearean festival seemed to die then, and there hasn’t been an opera in the Festival since the 1970s.

Berthold Carrière was appointed Festival Music Director in 1976. He musically directed the Festival’s return to Gilbert and Sullivan with 1981’s H.M.S. Pinafore. In the following years, there was a resurgence of G&S shows directed by Brian Macdonald that were hugely successful. However, when John Neville was appointed artistic director in 1986, he did away with the G&S. Robert Cushman (2002, p. 152) suggests that Neville was “perhaps irked by the extent to which Macdonald had created a company within a company, [and] remarked tartly that Stratford was ‘never meant to be a Gilbert and Sullivan festival’”. Instead of G&S, Neville mounted successful Broadway shows, starting, appropriately, with Rogers and Hart’s 1938 musical based on A comedy of errors - The boys from Syracuse. Neville was upfront about his reliance on the ability of musicals to draw crowds and revenue to the Festival. Neville opened his first two seasons with musicals mounted at the larger Festival Theatre, as Cushman cynically notes, “on the principle that, if you have a cash cow, you may as well milk it to its greatest capacity” (ibid., p. 170). Neville’s years were dominated by musicals such as Cabaret, My fair lady and Kiss me, Kate. Cushman notes that these were “brand-name shows […] shows, to put it bluntly, that everybody has heard of” (ibid., p. 171).

In contrast to Cushman’s depiction of Neville, a retrospective in the Montreal gazette stated:

During his term as artistic director, John Neville publicly expressed his concern about the festival’s growing dependence on big Broadway musicals. He deplored the prospect of a new generation of playgoers who perceive the festival primarily as a place to see musicals rather than as English Canada’s major bastion of classical theatre. (Portman 1991)

Yet, musicals worked to keep the Festival as a whole afloat; large crowds filled the Festival theatre to see the musicals, helping to finance the Shakespearean plays.

Although the Festival might have begun with a focus on opera and G&S, almost half of the staged music since 1955 have been musicals. However, when compared
to the entire production history of the Festival, musical offerings make up only a portion (see Table 2). Their role in the continuation of the Festival is integral; Cushman (2002, p. 173) wrote that all the musicals “did well at the box office, usually better than anything else in the season. Musicals were at Stratford to stay. Everybody knew why. The outstanding questions were which and how”.

Table 2: Stratford Festival programming, 1953-2011.

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<th>Musical Offerings at Stratford</th>
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<td>17 Operas, 24 Operettas, 39 Musicals</td>
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<th>Stratford Festival Programming</th>
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<td>506 Plays; 14 “Other” (mime, ballet, puppet shows and galas); 80 Musical Theatre (musicals, operas and operettas)</td>
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Which musicals are included each year and how they are produced is part of an ongoing evolution. The current Artistic Director’s background in musical theatre\(^1\) meant that during his tenure at the Stratford Festival, musicals were prioritised. While the Festival stage housed such works as *Kiss me, Kate* and *Camelot*, the Avon theatre was home for the first time in the Festival’s history to works by Andrew Lloyd Webber: *Evita* in 2010 and *Jesus Christ superstar* in 2011. For years the Festival had reinforced a core canon of musical theatre, but under McAnuff’s artistic direction, and with musical direction by Rick Fox, certain types of snobbery about musical theatre were eradicated. McAnuff ensured that musicals of all types were produced by the Festival and were taken seriously by members of the company and the audience. In an interview regarding his direction of *Jesus Christ superstar*, he said:

> The electrical musical has now been around for more than forty years and has a legitimate place in the classical theatre repertoire, at this point. Musicals themselves are, I think, one of the great theatrical genres and it would be, I think, well, just silly to exclude them. [...] We have actors who can go back and forth between *Titus Andronicus* and *Jesus Christ superstar* – how many companies in the world can say that? (cited in Ahern 2011)

Although McAnuff has announced that 2012 will be his last season at Stratford, he is confident that musicals will remain a central part of the Festival: “Musicals, I believe fervently, are an inherent part of the classical theatre repertoire and they deserve to be treated with great respect” (cited in Portman 2008). Musicals are definitely at Stratford to stay.

**Endnotes**

\(^1\) Des McAnuff had previously been artistic director at the La Jolla Playhouse in California, directing and bringing to Broadway such hits as *Tommy* and *Jersey boys*.

**References**


