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Item Type	Journal article
Authors	Browne, Sarah
Citation	Browne, S. (2018) The Last Ship from Broadway to Newcastle: A feminist political musical for the Brexit era, Studies in Musical Theatre
DOI	10.1386/smt.12.3.377_1
Publisher	Intellect
Journal	Studies in Musical Theatre
Rights	Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States
Download date	2025-04-30 14:41:35
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Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/2436/621938

Articles

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The Last Ship from Broadway to Newcastle: A feminist political musical for the Brexit era

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Abstract

Sting's musical, *The Last Ship* premiered on Broadway in 2014. Four years later, following a series of workshops at Northern Stage, the musical embarked on its UK tour featuring a number of revisions to its narrative and structure. What emerges from the revised production is a narrative, which places women at the centre through affording

them agency and allowing them to occupy powerful, liminal spaces. Whilst *The Last Ship* remains a tale for the working classes, its UK revisions do well to reposition the central role of the women in this community. Through removing principal characters, which previously served to reinforce a patriarchal hierarchy, the fictional women of Wallsend now drive the plot, allowing for *The Last Ship* to communicate a morality tale, which echoes the ideologies of a feminist, post-Brexit era.

Keywords

sting

feminist

political

Northern Stage

working class

musical

liminal

Sting's musical, *The Last Ship* made a rather convoluted voyage to UK stages. Workshop readings initially took place in 2011 in both Manhattan and Newcastle upon Tyne.

Following a tryout in Chicago in June 2014, the show then transferred to the Neil Simon Theatre on Broadway, with previews opening on 29 September 2014. Over two years later, a workshop took place at The Sage in Gateshead, in preparation for a UK tour, which would launch, appropriately at Northern Stage, Newcastle. On-board for this revised production were Lorne Campbell, artistic director of Northern Stage (book and direction), Selma Dimitrijevic (dramaturg) and Lucy Hind (movement director), with Sting's music and lyrics still at the helm.

Figure 1: Full cast of the UK touring production of *The Last Ship*. *The Last Ship*, A Northern Stage Production in association with Karl Sydow and Kathryn Schenker.

Photograph by Pamela Raith.

It always seemed a strange choice to locate the United States as the initial point of embarkation for Sting's semi-autobiographical musical. The story – which places the shipyards of Tyneside at its **centre** – seems so geographically specific that it is difficult to comprehend how this particular narrative could resonate with Broadway audiences. Even the West End, albeit far removed from the Northern shipyards, might seem a more suitable home for this musical. So when a UK national tour was announced, fans of both Sting and musical **theatre** drew a collective sigh of relief. As Sting admits, **'I wanted to give the community where I was born a voice, to tell a narrative in this form, because it's a story that hasn't been told'** (Campbell 2018: 11). Referring to the show as **'an emotional debt'**, it seemed that debt would now be paid in full. Furthermore, the ports where the show is due to dock are no further south than Cardiff; this would be a musical far-removed from the West End and perhaps hints at its potential appeal to a certain audience demographic.

Sting, born Gordon Matthew Thomas Sumner on 2 October 1951, grew up in the shadow of the Swan Hunter shipyard in Wallsend. Memories of his early childhood are dominated by the shipyard: **'every morning at 7am the hooter was sounded [...] a mournful wail calling the workers to the river, and hundreds of men filed down our street in their overalls and caps and work boots'** (Sting 2003: 26). His autobiography paints the picture of a grim, unforgiving, male-dominated environment. For the setting of a musical, this does not bode particularly well; the narrative would undoubtedly be told through the

lens of the male workers in a space alien to any of its potential female counterparts. When the Swan Hunter shipyard called in the receivers in 1993, *The Independent* noted that this posed ‘an immediate threat to the 2200 workforce in Wallsend, where there are pockets of male unemployment reaching 50 per cent’ (Harrison 1993). Sixteen years later, when the last ship to sail signalled the closure of the shipyard, Tom Brennan, regional secretary of the GMB Union remarked ‘it’s the final nail in the coffin [and] is a massive loss to the area. There is a romantic connection to shipbuilding on the Tyne’ (Wardrop 2009). Such sentiments, coupled with the impact on the local area, seem to suggest that *The Last Ship* would be a very British tale of unemployment and emasculation. A potential reference point might be *Billy Elliot* and it seemed that this would be another musical, which explored masculinity in the same way. What actually emerges from *The Last Ship* is a narrative in which women drive the plot (largely through the decisions they make which impact on the lives of the men around them), occupy spaces, which are transformative and powerful, and ultimately position women as the redeemers of the working class.

The staging

The staging is harsh and brutal, dominated by a tall staircase leading to an industrial gangplank. A stunning array of projections – designed by 59 Productions, who were also responsible for video design for the 2012 London Olympic Games – transform the space by way of an inventive use of gauze, into a multitude of settings; a pub, a parlour, a church, all of which are accompanied by an ever-transforming skyline. The theatrical space certainly captures the essence of a bygone industrial era and the sense of height seems to stem from Sting’s own recollections: ‘there was something prehistoric about the

shipyard, the giant skeletons of ships, and the workmen, tiny by comparison, suspended in an enormous cage silhouetted against the sky' (2003: 26).

Figure 2: Stage design by 59 Productions. *The Last Ship*, A Northern Stage Production in association with Karl Sydow and Kathryn Schenker. Photograph by Pamela Raith.

However, there is an intimacy fostered in the way the ensemble use the theatrical space and much of the action takes place on a platform **centre** stage, a decision that immediately suggests community; one that is safely enveloped by the skeletal framework of the shipyard itself. The cast entered the stage whilst the houselights remained: this was a story in motion, *in media res*. There was no overture as such, instead, one of the cast whipped out a tin whistle and joined the small pit orchestra in a rousing communal instrumental. As the rest of the cast appeared, they acknowledged the audience; we were welcome, but we were also complicit in whatever unfolded. Indeed, what unfolded was a story of our time and one that perhaps would not have resonated on UK stages in a pre-Brexit era. It became clear that in delaying a UK production, Sting and his team might have astutely observed that the time for such a musical was simply not right. This was a narrative that focused on the battle to save British industry in the face of Thatcherism and **denationalization**, one that intertwined politics and protest in ways that the current generation has only recently begun to experience.

As the audience become aware that the performance is already in process, they equally become aware of a female presence: set apart from the rest of the cast by costume, she appears to be controlling both the orchestra and the action onstage through her hand gestures. It is assumed she will continue to inhabit this liminal space throughout the production, but halfway through Act 1, she is actually revealed to be Ellen: the

illegitimate daughter of two of the lead characters (Meg Dawson and Gideon Fletcher), who attempts to leave Wallsend to make her name in a pop band, appropriately called 'Red Ellen and the Pirates'. Whilst this may be a nod to Sting's 'escape' from the same place to seek fame and fortune in the pop music industry, it is actually an homage to the Jarrow MP, Ellen Wilkinson, known as 'Red Ellen'. A fearless supporter of women's rights, Wilkinson wrote a candid account of the closure of Palmers shipyard in Jarrow and its impact on the workers, entitled *The Town That Was Murdered* (1939). According to Matt Perry, Wilkinson 'carefully spelled out Jarrow's social conditions', proposing that 'the workers have a strong attachment to the place [...] and on their sacrifice great capital has been accumulated' (Campbell 2018: 15). He notes the potential irrelevance of Wilkinson's views in an era where those looking 'to an industrial past are indulging in nostalgia' but juxtaposes this against the hostility of the far right towards workers' rights. In the United Kingdom, where the focus has been on rejuvenating British industry in the aftermath of the Brexit vote, the inclusion of Red Ellen takes on an additional meaning. If we are to make Britain an industrial, self-reliant economy outside of the European Union then perhaps we need to revisit the past to learn lessons for the future.

Ellen's role in the narrative of the musical is crucial to understanding not only the plight of the workers of Wallsend but the central role that women play in this story. It is clear throughout that the women decide their own fate: Meg Dawson chooses initially not to be compliant when Gideon returns from sea and the women of the town offer their unequivocal support of this ('If You Ever See Me Talking to a Sailor'). Ellen similarly chooses to leave and pursue a career in the music industry. Her rendition of 'All This Time' is angry and determined and, accompanied by her all-female band, ensures that

women are inserted into the popular music narrative; one that is inherently biased towards men. Moreover, the women of the town join the picket line and it is their unwavering support and level-headed response to the manager of the shipyard that convinces him to call off the police retaliation. As spokeswoman, Peggy White insists that the shipyard's final act – to launch the ship holding the body of her dead husband – is executed. Indeed, there is a sense that the men in this narrative have very little agency: Gideon does not return to his career at sea, forced instead to drop anchor by Meg and his child Ellen, and Jack White – foreman of the shipyard – dies of cancer. Even the manager of the shipyard, Freddy Newlands, is emasculated by the appearance of Baroness Tynedale, a Thatcher-esque figure who is complicit in the closure.

The UK version

Several revisions were made to the Broadway version in readiness for its UK premiere, including changes to the creative team; Lorne Campbell provided a new book (modifying the work of the original book writers John Logan and Brian Yorkey) and direction (replacing Joe Mantello). Stephen Hoggett's original choreography is revisited under the guidance of movement directors, Lucy Hind and Matt Daw, whilst some characters have been eliminated from the narrative; the priest, Father O'Brien has been removed entirely, as has Meg's current partner (Arthur Millburn) who posed a potential threat to Gideon's hopes of rekindling his teenage romance. The removal of the priest undoubtedly erodes the patriarchal hierarchy of the community, but the choice to eradicate the character of Arthur Millburn in particular is worthy of note. As reviews of the original Broadway production attest, 'a lot of the action focuses instead on [this] love triangle' and of course, such a plot device ensures that whilst the male characters are afforded the opportunity to

portray the whole gamut of emotion in song, women instead 'only get to sing about men' (Soloski 2014). Removing the character of Arthur allows UK audiences to view Meg Dawson as an independent, single mother who has successfully run a business and coped perfectly well without the assistance of a male figure in her life. This makes her choice to initially reject Gideon's renewed advances all the more poignant; there is a real sense that this woman has options, she chooses to remain in her current life and essentially forces Gideon to sacrifice his. The effect of altering the plot in this manner is perhaps most clearly communicated in Meg and Gideon's duet, the re-purposed Sting hit, 'When We Dance'. No longer a trio where Gideon has to sing 'If He Loved You Like I Love You' and actually reference another player on the stage (whereby Meg is placed in a position in which she is only defined by the two men either side of her), the duet functions instead as a plea, rather than an ultimatum from Gideon. Furthermore, the song only progresses both musically and dramatically when Meg commands the melody. Indeed, whenever Meg appears she commands the stage too. In the rousing 'If You Ever See Me Talking to a Stranger' she is fierce, energetic and shrewd. Here, performed by the impressive Frances McNamee, she channels her inner Lotte Lenya as the song moves from a reflective, tender ballad to a seductive, yet angry bossa nova. Just as Lenya issues her warning that the 'ship with eight sails' will lay siege to the men of the town in 'Pirate Jenny', Meg issues a similar tail of caution:

For a sailor's not a man to be trusted, He's treacherous as tides and hidden reefs.

Just to get you up the stairs he'll quote the bible in his prayers

Then before you know he's bound for Tenerife.

(Sting 2013)

This rounded portrayal of one of the lead female characters certainly makes the haunting ‘What Say You, Meg?’ (here sung by Gideon and not Arthur) less redundant. Meg has made her opinion of sailors explicit; the question mark at the end of the title now carries weight and rather than plunging into the inevitable marriage trope, the narrative seems to focus instead on her uncertainty. Meg’s resolve is not diminished; she is merely weighing up the benefits of a potential reunion.

Figure 3: From L to R: Parisa Shahmir (Young Meg), Orla Gormley (Cathleen), Rear – Frances McNamee (Meg Dawson), Annie Grace (Mrs Dees), Charlie Hardwick (Peggy White), Katie Moore (Ellen Dawson) and Susan Fay (onstage swing). *The Last Ship*, A Northern Stage Production in association with Karl Sydow and Kathryn Schenker.

Photograph by Pamela Raith.

Reviews of the original Broadway production seem to emphasize the inherent themes of masculinity in the musical suggesting that the workers in the shipyard have no possibility of reinventing themselves in the same way as perhaps the men in *The Full Monty* (2000), *Billy Elliot* (2005) and *Kinky Boots* (2012) manage to. As Alexis Soloski somewhat uncomfortably notes in her review of the Broadway production, the men in these musicals ‘reinvent themselves by taking on seemingly feminized work – dancing, cobbling shoes for transvestites, stripping’ (Soloski 2014: n.pag.). Regardless of the problematic assertion that certain work can be classed as ‘feminized’, this remark also seems to point to an insidious feature of musicals; one in which only the lead male characters can reinvent themselves or be afforded some kind of transformative experience, which impacts on the direction of the narrative. Whilst Soloski notes that the gender politics of the Broadway version of *The Last Ship* are ‘unreconstructed’, I would

argue that the UK version seems to have responded to the era of #Time'sUp and #MeToo by affording the female characters agency and control: indeed, only *their* decisions impact on the plot in meaningful ways.

Inherent theatricality of songs

Despite placing women at the **centre** of the narrative, the voice of Sting is ever present throughout the musical. Sting's lyrics have always possessed an inherent theatricality: 'Moon Over Bourbon Street' is an epic narrative encapsulated in three stanzas, 'Mad About You' is based on King David's love for Bathsheba as told in the second book of Samuel, Chapter 11, and 'Shape of My Heart' (co-written with Dominic Miller) is about a gambler who 'deals the cards to find the answer'. In *The Last Ship*, the score is less about the lyrics and more about the omnipresent voice of Sting himself. Richard Fleeshman, as Gideon Fletcher, emulates the sound of Sting's vocals to ensure that the composer himself is a ubiquitous player in the narrative that unfolds. In the solo 'The Night the Pugilist Learned How to Dance', Fleeshman jabs and twirls in an effort to tell Ellen how he moved from boxing to dancing in order to woo her mother. But it is his vocal dexterity that charms the audience: the timbre of his voice is so imbued with 'Sting' that the audience often forgets they are watching a live performance. His pronunciation of certain phrases and cadences indicates that Fleeshman must have spent a great deal of time listening to and learning from Sting's unique delivery. Although the music has been developed from Sting's album *The Soul Cages* (1991), this is by no means a jukebox musical (unless you count the inclusion of one scene – as mentioned above – where 'All This Time' is given a diegetic treatment), but the audience is

consistently reminded, through Fleeshman's performance, that this is Sting's story and his emotional debt that is being paid.

The auditory presence of Sting becomes most poignant in the final scene as Fleeshman's vocals soar over the chorus. In this scene, Ellen once more occupies the liminal space and directly implores the audience to take account of the story that has been presented. This final monologue reveals the relevance of this piece in the contemporary age: referencing the children of the Parkland School shooting alongside the 5.3 million Spanish citizens who, on International Women's Day and backed by the unions, walked out in protest against inequality and the gender pay gap, Ellen urges the audience to remember the resilience of the Wallsend shipyard workers when, for example, the NHS is under threat. Ellen has used her occupation of the liminal space to consider how we can fashion our future, which is further cemented as the name of the ship is revealed via a projection, which looms over the action onstage: Utopia. The auditory marker of Sting's voice – through Fleeshman – completed the reference to a better world, which addresses society's injustices; Sting is a human rights activist well-known for his work with Amnesty and founding the Rainforest Foundation Fund.

Too good for London?

Whilst the vocal timbre of Sting pervades this production it does little to deter from what is essentially a strong ensemble piece. Ensemble numbers are harmonically interesting and these rousing, stirring anthems appear at key points throughout the musical. The musical structure of 'We've Got Nowt Else' seems to suggest the opposite of the dead-end the shipyard workers have ostensibly reached. Constantly moving upwards both in terms of its melody and its pattern of modulation, this is almost a hymn of affirmation

and as a consequence, the audience do not quite perceive the finality of the closure of the shipyard but instead celebrate the community it has created. A hopeful sense of resilience is communicated effectively through the score and its associated performance.

As Michael Billington notes in his review of the production at Northern Stage, Newcastle, *The Last Ship* ‘in its vigorous endorsement of regional and working-class values [...] may be too good for London’ (Billington 2018). As an academic who has lived all her life in the Midlands I understand such a viewpoint; so often these geographically specific kinds of stories are neglected in favour of more utopian themes, which seek to unite us all in their universality. But there is merit in removing the musical from its West End-centricity. I keenly remember the impact and legacy of British Steel’s closure of the blast furnace in my home town; whilst at the time I may not have completely understood the full impact on the men in my family and the surrounding area, I do specifically recall that the women of my family went out to work instead. They were the ones who held the fabric of the community (and my family) together but in such moments their voices were often lost and their resilience ignored. *The Last Ship* pays tribute to such women and does so in very powerful ways, which serve as both a morality tale and a warning for the future. Ignore the voices of women and the working classes at your peril! It is a warning that both Britain, and the musical genre itself would do well to heed.

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