

in the national economy. A few days after the premiere of *Starlight Express*, the National Union of Mineworkers called a national strike against pit closures, including that of the lately closed pit at Cortonwood in South Yorkshire, and in favour of a vastly increased basic wage. This led to a major trial of industrial strength. On one side you had Arthur Scargill, the militant miners' leader. On the other, the National Coal Board led by Ian McGregor, an elderly Scots-American metallurgist who had been offered the chairmanship after his success in downsizing British Steel. For all the government's pretence at non-intervention, McGregor had clearly been appointed to do a job: to enforce pit closures and see off Arthur Scargill, who had humiliated the Heath government in 1974 into fighting an election which it had lost. As one Thatcherite minister put it, 'Our leader will not be satisfied until Scargill is seen trotting round Finchley tethered to the back of the prime ministerial Jaguar.' The result was a bitter, bloody dispute that divided Britain and left permanent scars. But the ultimate victory, if such it was, went to the government, which saw a split in the NUM, the closure of ever more pits and the miners going back to work. The miners' strike lasted a year: *Starlight Express* ran for twenty. But the two events make a fascinating conjunction. While hymning the virtues of old-fashioned, coal-powered trains in a way Scargill might have approved, the musical clearly exemplified the Thatcherite belief that the road to salvation lay through self-fulfilment.

Like *Cats*, *Starlight Express* depended heavily on an alliance between talent drawn from subsidised theatre and commercial know-how. What had formerly been a promiscuous liaison, however, turned into a contractual marriage with *Les Misérables*, which opened at the Barbican in October 1985 as a joint venture between Cameron Mackintosh and the RSC. Mackintosh had fallen in love with the original concept album of *Les Mis*, created by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg, when he first heard it in 1980. He had hawked the idea of an Anglicised version around London and New York. Eventually he commissioned the poet and critic, James Fenton, to produce a revised scenario and new lyrics. He also talked to Trevor Nunn and John Caird who had shown that an epic novel could be regurgitated on stage with their walloping 1980 RSC success, *Nicholas Nickleby*. It was Nunn, however, who insisted that he would only come on board if *Les Mis* was presented under a joint RSC-Mackintosh banner and if a percentage of all profits went in perpetuity to the company: a shrewd

move at a time when eyebrows were being raised at the freelance activities of both Nunn and Peter Hall at the National. For his part, Mackintosh insisted that *Les Mis* should enjoy a straight eight-week run at the Barbican, that it should be designed with an eventual transfer to the Palace Theatre in mind and that he himself, in consultation with the RSC, should be responsible for casting and musical decisions.

Looked at from one angle, this was a classic public-private partnership in which the brand name and technical expertise of the RSC were allied to the commercial flair of a West End showman. Seen from another perspective, however, it was rather as if the Old Vic of Lilian Baylis had gone into partnership with a flourishing entrepreneur like Charles Cochran. In the Thirties such an alliance would have been unthinkable: in the Thatcherite Eighties it was seen simply as a marriage of convenience. But, while the arrangement was of pragmatic benefit to the RSC, it set a dangerous precedent. It gave a commercial producer a large say in the artistic programming and policy of a subsidised national company; and, however well it accorded with the Thatcherite policy of stealthy privatisation of nationalised industries, it totally changed the rules of the theatrical game. Over the years Cameron Mackintosh was to develop a close working relationship with both of the country's big national companies. He co-produced a number of musicals with the NT and, as a theatre-owner as well as producer, now hosts the RSC's London seasons. But, while Mackintosh is a delightful man with an uninhibited schoolboyish passion for musical theatre, his power and influence tended to dilute the artistic independence of our national companies. In some ways, it was the result of a historical accident. It so happened that in the Eighties and late Nineties Trevor Nunn, Britain's best director of musicals, was running first the RSC and then the NT. This meant that if Mackintosh wanted Nunn's directorial services, he had to strike a deal with his respective companies. But Mackintosh's power was also a reflection of subsidised theatre's chronic shortage of funds and of our slavish obeisance to musicals. You can't altogether blame the cuddly Cameron. But one consequence of the RSC's partnership with Mackintosh over *Les Mis* was a shift of values. Increasingly our national companies were judged less by their obligations to the world repertoire than by the fundamental criterion of commercial theatre: is it a hit or a flop? Something in the culture radically changed in 1985; and changed for the worse.

Intriguingly, the blockbusting potential of *Les Mis* eluded most of us overnight critics back in 1985. Jack Tinker in the *Daily Mail* said that trying to condense Hugo's teeming novel into a three-hour musical was 'like attempting to pour the entire Channel through a China teapot'. John Barber in the *Daily Telegraph* spoke of a 'turgid panorama'. I myself wrote in the *Guardian* of 'cartoon characters' and 'vulgar melodrama'. Only Michael Coveney in the *Financial Times* hailed 'a piece that really does deserve the label "rock opera", occupying brand new ground between Verdi and Andrew Lloyd Webber'. Faced by a set of largely chilly overnight reviews, Mackintosh could easily have cut his losses and decided not to transfer the show to the Palace, thereby losing only his original £50,000 deposit. Wisely, however, he phoned the Barbican box office the morning after the first night to be told that there was a queue snaking all round the building that had been there since ten o'clock. It's hard to believe they were all dedicated readers of the *FT*. I suspect what attracted people was the mythical power of the title. Hardly anyone in England had read Victor Hugo's novel, including Cameron Mackintosh, but almost everyone had heard of it. It is, after all, the most filmed of all classic novels, dating back to a silent Pathé version made in 1907. And somewhere in the back of people's minds is a vague awareness that it has to do with obsessive pursuit and social injustice: as Trevor Nunn, who also hadn't read the book when he was first approached, pointed out to Cameron Mackintosh, 'it's a 19th century version of *The Fugitive*.'

But the global popularity of *Les Mis* doesn't mean the critics were automatically wrong: as Bernard Shaw said when accused of attacking a long-running piece of Gallic boulevard theatre, 'forty million Frenchmen can't be right.' What was so depressing about *Les Mis* was the way it reduced Hugo's epic structure and social detail to a few well-chosen banalities. Hugo, as V. S. Pritchett once pointed out, had a naturally dramatic eye that enabled him to 'bring things to life by implicating them with persons in the action in rapid takes'. Hugo also understood the drama of internal debate. When the pursued hero, who has swapped his old identity for a new one, is told by the obsessive Javert that a man answering to Valjean's description has been arrested, he undergoes a dark night of the soul. The real Valjean, we are told, 'strove in torment as another man had striven eighteen hundred years before him'. In the musical this potent image of Christ in the wilderness is lamely translated as 'Why should I right this wrong /

When I have come so far and struggled so long?' Even the musical's supposed identification with Paris's poor and oppressed amounted to little more than glamorised poverty: as Milton Shulman wittily observed, the death of the prostitute, Fantine, 'occurs on a bed as well made as anything supplied by BUPA'. As for the musical's evocation of the historic past, a survey of theatregoers conducted during the Broadway run revealed that the majority of them thought the action was set during the French Revolution. Somewhat defensively, Nunn and Caird wrote in the Barbican programme that the production took place against a background of traditional suspicions, 'for example that musical theatre cannot be serious and that classical companies cannot and ought not to attempt it'. But the notion that this kind of witless musical cartoon was inherently 'serious', as opposed presumably to the frivolity of *Anything Goes*, *Guys and Dolls* or *Girl Crazy*, showed just how much perfectly sane men had lost their critical judgement. *Les Mis* may have offered the RSC a vital financial lifeline: it also represented a degradation of standards and a vulgarisation of taste that seemed neatly to encapsulate the philistine spirit of the Eighties.

The next big musical of the decade, *The Phantom of the Opera*, presented no such problems. Composed by Andrew Lloyd Webber, jointly produced by Cameron Mackintosh and the Really Useful Company and opening at Her Majesty's in October 1986, this was a show that made no pretence at high seriousness. It delivered precisely what was promised on the packet: a piece of lavish romantic theatre in a style that might best be described as Metro-Goldwyn-Meyerbeer. But three things gave it distinction. It seemed to be driven by a strong personal imperative in that it was conceived as a vehicle for Lloyd Webber's beautiful young wife, Sarah Brightman, and dealt with the nature of amorous obsession; after cats and locomotives, we once more had a musical about the heart's affections. At the same time, Lloyd Webber's score was rich and closely textured. *Cats*, for all its unifying musical ideas, was essentially a 'numbers' show. 'Now,' as John Snelson wrote in his study of the composer, 'the emphasis was not on difference and structural separateness – with contrasting songs juxtaposed for deliberate contrast – but on dissolving such boundaries to create a more seamless whole.' But the real triumph lay with the late Maria Bjornson. Having worked frequently at the RSC and Covent Garden, she was recruited to design sets and costumes which gave *Phantom* its distinctive visual style. Inside the framework of Beerbohm Tree's handsome

Victorian theatre, she offered a stunning recreation of the Paris Opéra with its sweeping staircases, swagged curtains and gilt caryatids. As the hapless heroine descended into the underworld, Bjornson also led us via a tilting bridge towards a candle-filled lake reminiscent of those found in mad King Ludwig's Bavarian castles. Even if the ascent of the Opera House chandelier was more exciting than its ultimate descent, that was only because we all knew that what went up must come down. Bjornson's real achievement was to find a visual correlative to Lloyd Webber's ripe romanticism and to offer us an escape into a world of quilted horror. And escape was what audiences clearly craved in a year that saw the malfunctioning of a nuclear reactor at Chernobyl, the death of the crew of the US space-shuttle *Challenger*, the assassination of the Swedish prime minister Olof Palme and Cabinet ructions over the Westland helicopter affair. *The Phantom of the Opera* has continued to delight audiences over the decades. But it seemed especially comforting in a year of escalating catastrophe such as 1986 to sink into a world of artful hokum and romantic yearning where the only visible phantoms were those stalking the sewers of the Paris Opéra.

As *The Phantom* and its predecessors proved, musicals in the Eighties served a dual function: they distracted us from the daily realities of Thatcher's Britain while exemplifying the pursuit of profit that was its guiding principle. But the final big show of the decade was *Miss Saigon*, which opened at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane in September 1989; and, although it came from the Boublil-Schonberg team that had given us *Les Misérables*, it was a decisive cut above its predecessor. For a start it had a mythic plot deriving from Puccini's *Madam Butterfly*. Not only that: it actually improved on the Puccini prototype. In the opera Lieutenant Pinkerton is a callous shit who marries the fifteen-year-old Cio-Cio-San in the knowledge that the contract will not be legally binding and that he will eventually sail for America. In the musical Chris, an American GI serving in Saigon in 1975, swears his love for the seventeen-year-old Kim in apparent good faith. What separates them is the enforced American evacuation of Saigon; and, when Chris returns to what is now Ho Chi Minh City three years later with his new Atlanta bride, it is less in a spirit of Pinkertonian imperialism than one of post-war guilt. In offering to support Kim and her child, Chris and his bride symbolise America's belief that financial aid will somehow compensate for a tragedy created by its own disastrous intervention.

This was popular theatre with a political edge. The point it made was that the Americans never remotely understood the people they were supposedly protecting in Vietnam. Meanwhile the inhabitants of Saigon had an image of America entirely based on celluloid fantasy. Through the Pandarus-like character of The Engineer, vividly played by Jonathan Pryce, the musical showed the capacity for survival of the pimps and middle-men who moved easily from the sleazy corruption of capitalism to the regimented inhumanity of Communism: as Mr Pryce cynically announced at one point, 'I speak Uncle Ho and I think Uncle Sam.' In once again raiding the subsidised sector to find a director, Cameron Mackintosh also made a shrewd choice in Nicholas Hytner. In Hytner's disciplined hands, the spectacle served a narrative purpose. The raising of a great golden statue to Ho Chi Minh exemplified the secular idolatry characteristic of Communism and reminded me of Hytner's use of totalitarian icons in his low-budget ENO staging of Wagner's *Rienzi*. And the famous moment when a helicopter descended onto the roof of the US Embassy was notable less for its theatrical engineering than for its image of Vietnamese women clawing at the wire compound begging to be evacuated. *Miss Saigon's* critique of capitalism and its vision of the personal tragedies created by American foreign policy did not stop it making bundles of money or being a big success on Broadway; even though Mackintosh was forced into a disruptive row with American Equity which insanely decided that his decision to import Pryce to play the role of the Eurasian Engineer was somehow racist. What made *Miss Saigon* unique amongst Eighties musicals was that it had something interesting to say. Significantly, it came at the fag-end of the Thatcher era when the mystique of her 'special relationship' with Ronald Reagan was starting to wear thin – not surprisingly, in view of America's unilateral invasion of Grenada and a Reykjavik summit in which Reagan independently agreed to the abolition of nuclear warheads. Musicals distracted us from reality for much of the Eighties; but by the end of the decade there were reassuring signs that the public wanted something more than apolitical escapism and that the theatre was slowly recovering its traditional capacity for dissent.

Some would argue that the capacity for dissent had never gone away; but the stark fact is that it took a long time for the theatre to mount an intellectually coherent attack on Thatcherism. In the event two particular