

***Kiss Me, Kate* – too esoteric for Broadway...?**

Take a burnt-out composer, a plot that was considered commercially disastrous and too esoteric for Broadway, and what do you have? In the case of *Kiss Me, Kate!* (1948) you have one of the undisputed masterpieces of the Broadway stage. The composer was, of course, Cole Porter and the person who expressed those opinions of the plot...well, that was Cole Porter too! However, after that seemingly inauspicious genesis *Kate* was a show that, once begun, never looked back.

In 1935 a young stage manager, Arnold Saint Subber, was amused to witness the vitriolic backstage arguments of a husband and wife acting team, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne. They were appearing in *The Taming of the Shrew* and the ironic juxtaposition of Shakespeare's scripted squabbles and the (presumably spontaneous) fighting backstage was not lost on Subber. It was he who devised the idea of developing this incident as a musical, complete with the authentic Shakespeare background as he had previously witnessed it.

He approached the set designer Lemuel Ayers and the writer Bella Spewack. She produced the outline of a book, (much as we know it today), and then tried to interest a composer. First choice was Burton Lane who had recently had success with *Finian's Rainbow*. Lane was otherwise engaged and so Spewack turned to Cole Porter.

We already know the nature of Porter's excuses for not getting involved in the project. And he proved hard to get. They were, however, only excuses. The real reason for his anxiety was that he had entirely lost confidence in his abilities as a Broadway composer. He felt that he belonged to an age where the plot of the show was loosely hung around some good songs. The advent of swing (a style with which Porter was never comfortable) and the revolution that *Oklahoma!* (1943) had wrought in the musical theatre (where plot and song were inextricably interwoven) had coincided...or been the cause of...an inexorable decline in Porter's powers as a composer. This decline began in 1940 with *Panama Hattie* and continued with *Seven Lively Arts* (1944) and *Around the World* (1946). By 1947 he felt he was washed up...and so did everyone else.

Fortunately for us, Bella persisted and the rest, as they say, is history. *Kate* opened at the Schubert Theatre in Philadelphia on Thursday 2 December 1948 for the customary pre-Broadway try-out. The dazzling cast was led by Broadway stars, Alfred Drake and Patricia Morison. Critics ran out of superlatives in praise of the show and, unusually for a musical show, not one song was added, dropped or moved before the Broadway opening on Thursday 30 December. It would seem that *Kate* had finally given Porter back his voice. After his initial misgivings, the score flowed from his pen "like an avalanche". The plot provided the golden opportunity for many styles of writing from the flawless love ballad *So in Love*; the biting cynicism of *I Hate Men*; the pastiche of *Wunderbar*; the seamless patter of *Where is the Life That Late I Led?*, to the literary comedy of *Brush Up Your Shakespeare*.

Kate ran on Broadway for a monumental 1077 performances. The National Company then toured for three years. Patricia Morison repeated her performance in London in 1951 where the show ran 400 performances. The MGM film was released in 1953 (having been contractually delayed until the end of the national tour). It was the first 3-D film based on a Broadway musical. Other "firsts" achieved by *Kate* include the first American musical ever presented at the Vienna Volksoper (where it remained in repertory for nearly a decade); the first American musical to be staged in Poland, and the first Broadway cast album ever released on LP. It has been translated into 18 languages playing in, among other places, Berlin; Turkey; Japan; Czechoslovakia; Hungary and South America. In 1949 *Kate* won five Tony Awards, (the Broadway equivalent of the "Oscar"), for best musical; best produced show; best script; best score and best costumes. Since it opened in 1948, the show has been presented countless times by amateur societies throughout the world and in many successful professional revivals; notably in 1987 by our own Royal Shakespeare Company...whose cast presumably had no trouble at all with the Shakespearean dialogue in the *Shrew* interludes.

The production you will see today is the 1999 Broadway revival also successfully presented in London in 2001. Somewhat updated, it also includes the Porter standard, *From this Moment On*, not from the original show but included in the MGM film. The most significant change is that of Lilli's current *amour* to be cast as a grotesque US General replete with the rhetoric of fraudulent "family values". For once, one may believe that, even with all his faults, her "ex" really is the better bet.

Sit back and enjoy. Another Opening, Another Show...

Terry Foster

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