

Me and My Girl

It took a brave "angel" to invest in a quaint, virtually forgotten, fifty year old English musical in the mid-1980s. But if you were one of those brave souls, you'd have struck gold as Me And My Girl first took London's West End by storm and then (even more miraculously) re-peated the trick on Broadway. In 1937 the show ran for 1646 performances: the 1985 re-vival was even more successful, running for eight years in London alone.

Like most musical comedies, Me And My Girl was written "for the moment" with little thought of theatrical longevity, and with the talents of a particular performer in mind. In this case the performer was Lupino "Nipper" Lane, one of the great comics of the time. He had starred in a hit musical, Twenty To One, in 1935 playing the role of Bill Snibson; a bookie from Lambeth who, in a fit of remorse, joins the anti-gambling league. Recognising he was onto a good thing, the show's producer, Sir Oswald Stoll, wanted another Snibson story. Lane himself came up with the idea of throwing Snibson head-first into the aristoc-racy. Other than using the Snibson character, the outline by L. Arthur Rose (who had con-tributed to Twenty To One), contained no reference to the earlier show. To everyone's amazement, Stoll rejected it. However, Lane was convinced he had a hit and decided to risk all his savings on producing it himself. With music by Noel Gay and book by Douglas Fur-ber and L. Arthur Rose, Me And My Girl opened at the Victoria Palace Theatre on 16th De-cember 1937.

All three collaborators were well known in the musical comedy world, but Noel Gay was to have the most astonishing career of them all. Born Reginald Armitage in 1898 in Wake-field, he became assistant organist at the Cathedral by the age of twelve and seemed destined for a university or cathedral career. In 1913 he began study at the Royal College of Music, became director of music and organist at St Anne's Church, Soho and then spent four years at Christ's College, Cambridge. A chance opportunity to write the score for a review (Stop Press) in 1926 changed his direction completely. With growing success in this unexpected career, Armitage decided to change his name to avoid any embarrassment to the church au-thorities. Whether he amalgamated the names of two stars, Noel Coward and Maisie Gay, or adapted an old family name, Noel Gale, is not certain. What is certain is that Gay re-mains to this day one of the most prolific and successful of British composers; 26 West End shows, 28 films and 45 "hit" tunes including Run, Rabbit Run. His Tondeleyo was the first song to be synchronised into a British talking picture.

Back to the show. It had an inauspicious start.

An arrangement with the Saville Theatre fell through, George Graves (the co-star) threat-ened to leave and the company were despondent thinking that they were in a flop. The only available theatre was the Victoria Palace where business had been so bad that its lease was on offer. Faced with this or closing the show, Lane took the lease. Fair reviews did nothing to stimulate the public's interest and in desperation, Lane begged the BBC to put on a wire-less broadcast. Unfortunately the schedules were full for weeks ahead...by which time the show would have almost certainly closed. Then Lane's luck changed. Jack Payne had to cancel a broadcast and the spot was offered to Lane who hurriedly arranged for an excerpt of the show to be broadcast live in front of an audience. That was 4th January 1938. It did the trick. The sound of the audience laughter and cheers resulted in a rush on the box of-fice.

The show broke box office records. The Lambeth Walk achieved world-wide fame, often in translation, and became almost a national anthem. It became a dance craze as virtually every dance band in the land included it in their repertoire. After war was declared, and theatres closed, Me And My Girl was the first show back with afternoon performances and returned to London after the initial run, in 1941 and 1945. Lupino Lane played more than 5000 London performances finishing in 1949. It was the first musical show to be televised (1939) and was filmed in the same year under the title Lambeth Walk.

Gay's son Richard Armitage decided to revive the show in the 1980s. Little did he realise the amount of detective work this would entail. The show only existed in a much-altered amateur performing edition from the 1950s. The only original script was a pre-rehearsal edition held by the Lord Chamberlain's office...complete with censorship marks and not at all like the version of the show that eventually made the stage. The last known remaining copy of the film had been destroyed just months before Richard began his search for it.

Pulling the few pieces he had together and relying on the memories of some who had seen the original production, Armitage produced the basis of what was to become the version adapted by Stephen Fry and Mike Ockrent. It was not the intention to modernise it although cockney rhyming slang, (a novelty in 1937), and topical events needed pruning. "Holes" were filled with the addition of two new songs - both from Gay's catalogue - Leaning On A Lampost and The Sun Has Got His Hat On.

With Robert Lindsay and Emma Thompson starring, the revival run began on 23th November, 1984 at the Haymarket Theatre, Leicester where it proceeded to break all records in the theatre's 11 year history. It moved to London at the Adelphi on 12th February 1985 where it stayed until 16th January 1993. Robert Lindsay headed the otherwise American cast on Broadway in August 1986. It has since been seen all over the world - even in Japan where it was, unbelievably, performed by an all-female cast. Now on release to amateur companies in the new revival version, it is set to gain many more fans.

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