

**Contemporary British Musicals: 'Out of the Darkness',
Clare Chandler and Gus Gowland (eds) (2024)**

LOVELOCK, James <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4969-4950>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/35930/>

This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

Citation:

LOVELOCK, James (2025). Contemporary British Musicals: 'Out of the Darkness', Clare Chandler and Gus Gowland (eds) (2024). *Studies in Musical Theatre*, 19 (1), 95-98. [Article]

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

CONTEMPORARY BRITISH MUSICALS: ‘OUT OF THE DARKNESS’, CLARE CHANDLER AND GUS GOWLAND (EDS.) (2024)

**New York and London: Methuen Drama, 224 pp.
ISBN 9781350268050, p/bk \$34.95**

Reviewed by James Lovelock, independent scholar

The British musical has undergone a renaissance over the past fifteen years, and Clare Chandler and Gus Gowland’s timely collection of essays celebrates some of the new work produced between 2011 and 2020. As Chandler notes in the introduction, the refocus of funding from Arts Council England into new musical theatre initiatives such as Mercury Musical Development, Musical Theatre Network and Perfect Pitch has encouraged regional theatres to develop the craft of writing and producing new musicals across the UK. The introduction focuses on the relationship between the British musical and the Broadway musical, and there is evidence here that the British musical is more than capable of standing on its own feet, and this is borne out by the recent success of *Standing At The Sky’s Edge* (2019), *Operation Mincemeat* (2023) and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2024) in regional and off-West End theatres and subsequently in the West End itself. The essays in this edited collection are an excellent starting point for those who wish to build on the work of Gordon, Jubin and Taylor (2016) and Barnes (2022) in considering the national identity of the British musical as its own entity.

The collection consists of ten essays, each of which focuses on a different new British musical written between 2011 and 2020, and ten corresponding interviews with creatives who worked on each musical. Each essay interrogates its case study using a critical lens – gender, sexuality, race or disability – and this will no doubt be useful for teachers who are introducing cultural theory to their musical theatre students. There is a welcome focus on regional productions, as all of the musicals were developed in regional or off-West End theatres. The collection showcases several new voices alongside more experienced scholars,

and the extensive contribution of female and non-binary academics to the volume is welcome and long overdue. Several essays explore the intersections of gender with disability, race and/or sexuality and this approach results in some unique insights into the musicals examined.

The collection begins with Broderick Chow's analysis of the representation of early 2000s masculinities in *Departure Lounge* (2011). Chow's multifaceted consideration of race, sexuality and social class alongside masculinities makes this chapter an excellent starting point for any students who are interested in using the work of Raewyn Connell and Eric Anderson to interrogate how men are represented in contemporary musical theatre. Stephanie Lim's chapter on *Matilda* (2012) draws on Bakhtin's theory of the *carnavalesque* to provide a nuanced criticism of the gender politics in both the original novel and the musical. Lim highlights the possible impact of the all-male creative team (with the exception of associate choreographer Ellen Kane) and identifies how the musical continues to return to gender-normative structures despite the presence of Matilda as a disruptive force.

Jozey Grae's auto-ethnographical approach to *Lift* (2013) allows them to read genderfluidity through the queer characters of the ballet dancer and the French teacher, and their non-binary approach provides a welcome broadening of gender studies in musical theatre that will hopefully influence future writing in this area. Kelsey Blair's study of the musical adaptation of *Bend It Like Beckham* (dir. Gurinder Chadha, 2015) highlights the refocusing of the 2002 film to focus on the mother-daughter relationships between Mrs Bhamra and Jaz, and Paula and Jules. Blair makes some important points about multiculturalism that arises from the musical's new setting in Southall, and I think there is room to further interrogate the choice of Goodall and Hart as the composer and lyricist on the project given this setting.

One of my favourite essays in the collection is Sarah K. Whitfield's work on *Flowers*

for *Mrs Harris* (2016), which focuses on the 2020 Digital Theatre Plus streaming of the musical. Whitfield skilfully weaves an analysis of the musical's themes into a personal narrative about the importance of digital theatre during the pandemic, particularly for caregivers and disabled people at high risk of contracting COVID. Whitfield's call for continued access to digital theatre for disabled audiences is particularly timely at a moment where the technological advances made during the pandemic seem to have been forgotten. Ellen Armstrong's chapter on *The Grinning Man* (2016) offers a further challenge to those representing disabilities through musical theatre, concluding that disability is 'both hyper-visible, yet conspicuously absent' in the musical and in musical theatre more widely. Armstrong's references to social media conversations with the 'Grinners' (the fandom connected with *The Grinning Man*) offers an additional layer to the close analysis adopted in this chapter.

Hannah Thuraisingam Robbins's essay on *Everybody's Talking About Jamie* (2017) examines further queer possibilities in future iterations of the musical, with a persuasive reading of Ray as part of the desi 'auntie' tradition and potentially as a queer ally for Jamie. Robbins also identifies some of the limitations of the show in its current iteration, particularly in how casting Jamie with a mixed-race actor can lead to a stereotypical representation of the homophobic Black father. Leading on from this, Aviva Neff offers a criticism of the casting in *Six*, observing that both Jane Seymour and Anna of Cleves have often been restricted to stereotypical casting tropes that align with race. As of late 2024, this casting still seems to be the norm for the musical, and Neff's intervention also has repercussions for challenging colorism based on skin tone within casting.

Judith Drake's chapter provides an excellent analysis of the creative process of *My Left Right Foot*, which clearly benefits from Drake's experience as a creative consultant on the production. Drake highlights how the musical acts as a microcosmic representation of the

industry's attitude towards disability in general, and Drake's careful negotiation of its themes (along with Whitfield and Armstrong's chapters in this collection) demonstrate the need for further study of disability and musical theatre following Yates and Donovan's work in the United States. Finally, Cyrielle Garson explores *The Assassination of Katie Hopkins* as a piece of faux verbatim theatre that reflects the post-truth era that we find ourselves in, drawing parallels with other faux-verbatim and verbatim theatre in musical theatre and beyond.

There is much to recommend this collection, and the editors have worked hard to present a lively and thoughtful collection of essays that focus on under-represented groups in musical theatre. The interviews with key creatives from each musical offer some valuable additional insights, and it is unfortunate that they are only rarely in explicit dialogue with the corresponding essay. This only serves to accentuate the divide between academia and the industry, and thus this 'hybrid' approach only really works where the essay author has undertaken their own interview with the same creative (see Chow) or has drawn on other interviews with them (see Whitfield). I think there is also room for the book to answer a question that I was recently asked by a student at an academic conference – 'what trends are there in the contemporary British musical?' As an example, there are some clear indications throughout the book that the specificity of location (both geographically and in terms of time) plays an integral part in many of these musicals, and that many regional theatres are beginning to recognise the importance of connecting with their local and regional audiences. Although Chandler explicitly rejects an exact definition of the British musical in the introduction, there is room to consider what might connect the ten case studies as part of a specifically British musical theatre repertoire. I look forward to reading Whitfield and Chandler's forthcoming publication *Understanding British Musical Theatre: Drawing on the*

Data 2010-2020, which will no doubt be a useful companion to this thought-provoking volume.

References

- Anderson, Eric (2009), *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities*, New York and Abingdon: Routledge.
- Barnes, Grace (2022), *National Identity and the British Musical: From Blood Brothers to Cinderella*, London, New York, and Dublin: Methuen Drama.
- Connell, R. W. (2005), *Masculinities*, 2nd ed., Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Donovan, Ryan (2023). *Broadway Bodies: A Critical History of Conformity*, London and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gordon, Robert, Jubin, Olaf, and Taylor, Millie (2016), *British Musical Theatre Since 1950*, London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama.
- Whitfield, Sarah K., and Chandler, Clare (forthcoming), *Understanding British Musical Theatre: Drawing on the Data 2010-2020*.
- Yates, Samuel (2020), 'Disability and the American Stage Musical', in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Disability* (pp. 265-275), ed. Alice Hall, New York and Abingdon: Routledge.