

Revolution set to music

By Clive Bradley

West End musicals might not seem an obvious issue for socialist comment. Most people on the Left probably see them as inevitably trash, designed for money-loaded tourists and without any social or political meaning. Yet coach parties of working class people also go to see these shows. And, maybe, not because they are too culturally stunted to distinguish drama from *Neighbours*.

Over the last few years there has been something of a sea change in the issues people write musicals about. Boy meets girl at stage door and they dance their way to fame and fortune (and love, of course) is out. Now we get the 1830 revolution in France (*Les Miserables*), the Vietnam War (*Miss Saigon*), and Martin Luther King (*King*).

King, however, died a very quick death as a result of semi-political furore before it opened. Coretta King, Martin's widow, objected to parts of it, lyricist Maya Angelou disowned it, the director had to be changed. So bookings were poor, because no one knew if it would ever even open, and with lukewarm reviews, the show folded.

Possibly, although there doesn't seem to be any hard evidence for this, its failure had something to do with having an almost all black cast; apparently it attracted bigger black audiences than most musicals, although that's hardly surprising. Maybe rich white tourists were less interested in *King* than in *Phantom of the Opera*.

In the end *King* did get official approval: Coretta King attended the opening night. But by then it was too late.

A few years ago, it would have been unlikely that a modern political theme of this nature would have been tried. *West Side Story*, while not overtly political, did deal with modern 'social' issues. Since then, there was, of course, the highly controversial *Hair*, which celebrated hippy culture and lambasted old-fashioned values and the Vietnam War. Otherwise, there had been little of that type of musical.

Mr Big in the world of musicals is, of

course, Andrew Lloyd Webber, and his name — he is a Tory — does not conjure up visions of profound political thought. His first two successes, *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita* were an attempt to deal with substantial issues. *Superstar*, I think, is really about sixties hippydom, naive utopias and all that and is much in the *Hair* mould, but without the radicalism (though it did upset the religious establishment). *Evita* is, of course, about Eva Peron.

But Lloyd Webber's politics (or those of his lyricist Tim Rice) are excruciatingly banal, as well as being catch-penny. *Evita* has Che Guevara anachronistically wondering around representing the spirit of continental revolution, and the theme seems to have been picked more for Peron's charismatic glamour than for anything political. *Superstar's* hippy, like one of *Hair's*, ends up dead, but exactly what he did sacrifice, and whether it was worth it, is left open.

Since then, Lloyd Webber has abandoned all pretence at dealing with 'big' questions. Now, it's pussy cats dancing to horrendously mangled TS Eliot poems, musical resettlings of silent movies, and — I ask you! — people roller skating across the stage pretending to be trains!

Aspects of Love is the polar opposite of social-conscience musicals: it's about personal relationships, love, life, death, with little intrusion from the outside world.

While less well-known as names than Lloyd Webber, French composer Claude-Michel Schönberg and lyricist Alain Boublil must soon be rivalling his income. They now have two mega-hits on the London stage, *Les Miserables* and *Miss Saigon*, which boldly set out to tackle major historical and political subjects. Both have huge advanced-bookings, and *Les Miserables* has been a success all across the world.

City Limits describes *Miss Saigon*, which is still playing with its original cast, as "a tuneless, exploitative bore", which epitomises modish left attitudes towards West End stage musicals. It is an incomprehensible and stupid judgement, motivated either by abject tone-deafness or, more likely, by a determination to hate it on principle — a principle set, however, by nothing more respectable than peer pressure and snobbery.



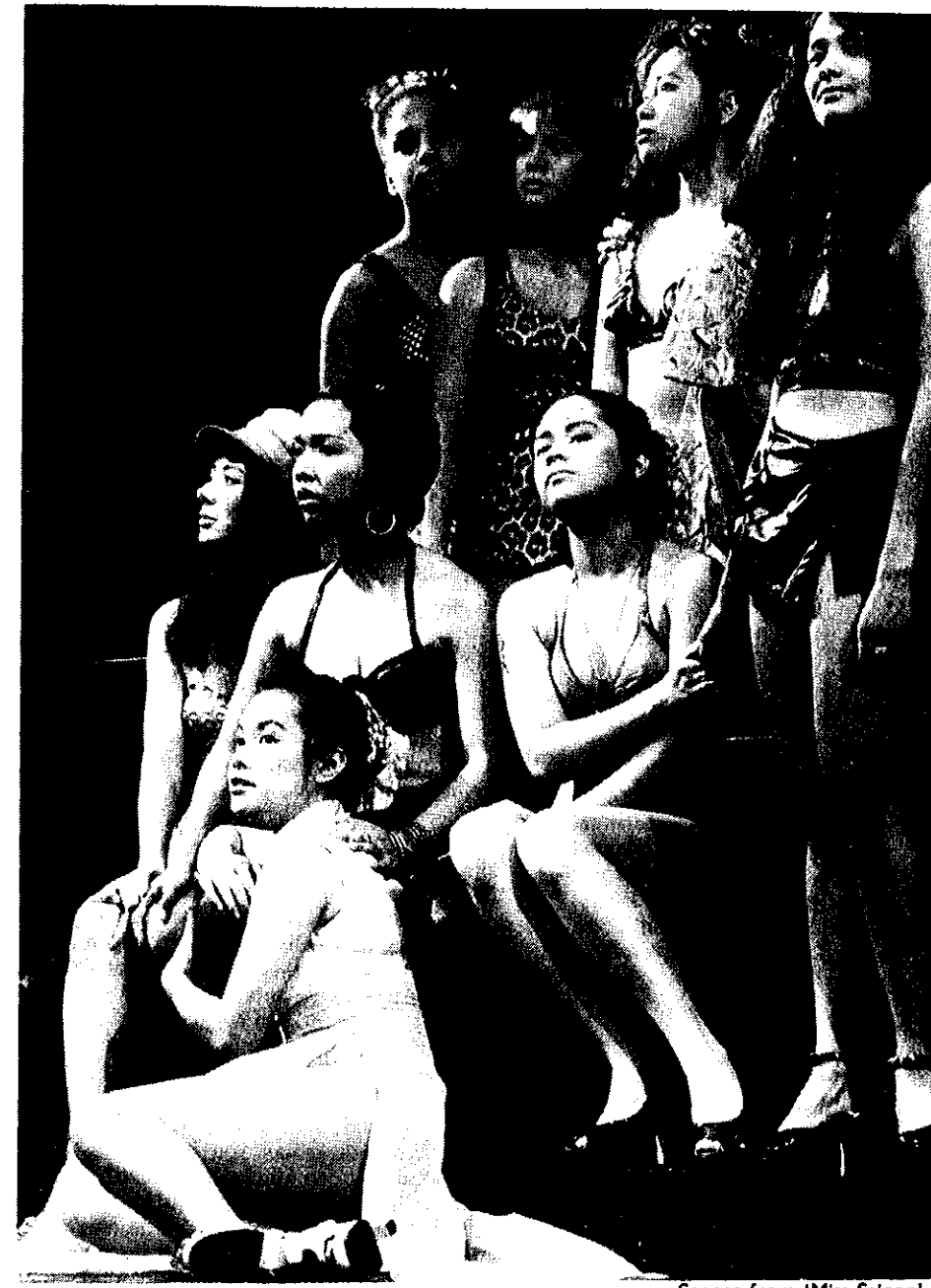
Miss Saigon is an up-date of *Madam Butterfly*. Instead of Japan, it's set in Vietnam, beginning on the eve of the American evacuation. A GI sleeps with a virgin prostitute, and they fall in love. But he is forced to leave the country without her. Three years later, now married, he discovers that she is living in Bangkok, with his child. When she learns that he has a wife, she kills herself, knowing there is no other way she can make sure her little boy will be taken back to a new life in America.

As much as you could expect within the limits of a musical, *Miss Saigon* covers its themes with subtlety and sophistication. The Vietnamese prostitutes (and their pimp) all have wild dreams of escape to America which never materialise, and anyway are false. Part of the emotional tension created by the climax is that when Kim, 'Miss Saigon', sings to her child,

"You will be who you want to be, you can choose whatever heaven grants," the audience knows that it is simply not true. He will go to America with his father, but hardly to the fantasy world she has in her head.

Politically, it is resolutely liberal, very much on the level of the recent spate of 'Nam' movies. The Americans did no good for Vietnam. But the Vietnamese are portrayed as victims not only of the Americans, but also of the Viet Cong, who are all fanatics and sadists. The Vietnamese whose ingenuity in survival we most admire are the prostitutes and pimps, who understand the world ("Men will always be men, the rules are the same"), and get by on the strength of their wits and their illusions.

But within that framework, I cannot see how it is "exploitative". And from a certain point of view — namely, that of its



Scenes from 'Miss Saigon' characters — its picture of reality is not entirely false. I'm sure a lot of Vietnamese did see themselves as innocent bystanders.

Les Miserables is a setting of Victor Hugo's epic account of revolution and counter-revolution in France. It nods at the idea that revolution is a naive waste of blood. But it ends with the ghosts of all those who have fallen to the bullets of the police, or the travails of life in general, promising that one day, justice and liberty will be won. Again, pretty liberal, no doubt, and therefore limited. But it brought tears to my eyes.

And it wasn't designed and written to be a major money-spinner. Originally, in England, it was produced at the Barbican arts centre, and became a hit because it was so impressive.

Musically and visually both *Les Miserables* and *Miss Saigon* are extremely classy (at the risk of obsessiveness, I

repeat that *City Limits*' claim that *Miss Saigon* is "tuneless" is completely beyond me).

Whether the coach parties and tourists paying £20 a ticket get much of a political message from them is another matter, of course; and so is whether paying £20 or more to watch stories about desperately poor people isn't odd in itself. But is that not the fault of the theatre business, rather than the musicals themselves? All West End theatre is expensive. It would be idiotic to knock Shakespeare because you have to pay too much to see him.

Given a choice between the standard musical plot, and something with a bit more relevance, surely we should go for relevance. Less money is wasted producing a West End musical than a Hollywood blockbuster. I spent £7.50 to see *Miss Saigon* on a Saturday, and I think it was worth every penny.