

# A DEAD-END STREET FOR ROCK'N'ROLL

The Kinks musical 'Sunny Afternoon' is a huge hit, but, asks **SIMON HARDEMAN**, is the theatre killing off rock's raw appeal?

Wannabe rock-musical stars have been queuing for auditions this week in New York. They're all hoping for a part in Andrew Lloyd Webber's theatrical version of the Jack Black film, *School of Rock* – the latest stage show aiming to bottle the essence of rock'n'roll and put it in the script to be released in a predictable fashion, night after night, matinee after matinee. You don't have to look far for other examples of theatre co-opting rock. The Kinks sing-along-a-story, *Sunny Afternoon*, is packing in the punters in the West End, to where The Beatles "theatrical concert" *Let It Be* is about to return. And Queen's *We Will Rock You* may have recently ended its 1,000-year run there, but there are still plenty of jukebox shows pumping out baby-boomer-friendly ear-worms and musicals making free use of rock'n'roll clichés to pack in the punters.

Leaving aside whether Baron Lloyd-Webber of *Sydmonton* and his book writer Baron (Julian) (*Downton Abbey*) Fellowes of West Stafford are really the right people to handle a tale of rock'n'roll salvation, can *any* theatre ever capture the magic of the music? From stage productions of The Who's *Tommy* to Green Day's *American Idiot* to *Sunny Afternoon*, through to jukebox blasts like *Rock of Ages*, hasn't theatre always sanitised away the essence of rock when it has tried to profit from its power?

*Sunny Afternoon* director Edward Hall doesn't think it has: "Every night the [*Sunny Afternoon*] audience get on their feet and I feel then that [we've] harnessed something and it does give a high that you can get from a gig." But doesn't the unpredictability, the danger, of a real gig get lost in theatre? After all, as he says: "The audience are going on an emotional and narrative journey that is very different to what you see at a gig. The actors are playing characters and the songs move from being internal to consciously performed."

Well, the show's musical director, Elliott Ware, makes a bold claim. Ware, who has worked on The Who's *Quadrophenia* and on *We Will Rock You*, agrees there has to be a greater degree of control, but says he can "build the spontaneity into it... make it appear more random." He explains: "A lot of rehearsal goes into rock'n'roll, even though it seems spontaneous, and a lot of rehearsal goes in to musical theatre and it may not seem so spontaneous. They're not a million miles apart."

This kind of artificial spontaneity isn't easy, though. Reviewing chart-topping US punksters Green Day's 2010 musical-theatre version of *American Idiot*, the critic Jim Harrington described how the music sounded "processed

and stale, handled with kid gloves by way too many players and sung by more than a dozen actors that have rehearsed the original fire right out of the songs..." But what did Harrington know? The show was a huge success, winning two Tony Awards, and grossing \$4.0m in its first year-long run on Broadway alone.

But Harrington was a music reviewer (theatre reviewers mostly loved the show), on one side of the ideological divide between the perceived superficiality of commercial theatre and rock's "association with discourses of authenticity", as US academic Elizabeth Wollman puts it in the recent book *Bad Music*. She says theatre is often seen as killing "the raw energy and excitement that makes rock appealing in the first place".

Ironically, one theatre visionary tried to move towards rock performance before rock even existed. In the 1930s French iconoclast Antonin Artaud proposed his Theatre of Cruelty, and envisaged the invention of new instruments that could "attain a new range and compass, producing sounds or noises that are unbearably piercing" while words could be replaced by unintelligible screams. If that doesn't sound like a rock concert then I don't know what does. Patti Smith is one who has acknowledged Artaud's influence.

*Sunny Afternoon* composer/lyricist and the Kinks leader, Ray Davies, also has a lot of previous in experimenting with the stage (rather than merely being theatrical in performance, like many rockers). In the early 1970s he created a mini TV rock opera, *Starmaker*, and toured several Kinks albums as musical plays within Kinks concerts. But his journey since then is instructive – collaborating on steadily more mainstream theatrical projects, culminating in the current hit show, which unashamedly massages Kinks songs and history into a relatively conventional musical-theatre format.

Davies and Elliott Ware got the right sound for *Sunny Afternoon*'s take on the primal "You Really Got Me" by sourcing period guitars and amplifiers, and in the show they certainly sound fantastic. But you can't source context. Their use is still scripted and cued.

Or have we now accepted that, in the age of click-track cues for musicians, a gig is just as predictable as theatre? Perhaps that's what people want now. Edward Hall says: "The thousands and thousands of people who go to see rock music in theatre shows are living testament to the appetite that people have to listen to music in a different context." Well, maybe.

It's no mean feat to produce a genuine mainstream rock musical hit like *Sunny Afternoon*, as Hall has done. US stage historian John Kenrick tells me how, when Gower Champion, the award-winning director of *Hello, Dolly!* and *42nd Street*, staged the rock musical *Rockabye Hamlet*, "it was one of the worst disasters in Broadway history". Audiences laughed when Ophelia sang the title song and strangled herself with her microphone cord. It's a salutary image. Rock music is in danger whenever it gets into a theatre. Lloyd Webber take note. ●



Well-respected man: John Dagleish as Ray Davies in 'Sunny Afternoon' KEVIN CUMMINS

'Sunny Afternoon', Harold Pinter Theatre, London SW1 (0844 871 7622) to 23 May. 'School of Rock' is set to open on Broadway later this year