Enter, stage right: Neoconservatism, English Canada and the megamusical

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Megamusicals and global culture: an international diet of McTheatre for the masses?

The megamusical and industrial transformation

The economic engine, geographical site, theatrical community and larger social imaginary known as Broadway is currently being transformed. The same matrix of social, material and ideal constellations we call the West End is also undergoing a slower if similar transfiguration. In both instances, this transfiguration is indicative of live theatre's very own industrial revolution which, in the late twentieth century, is necessarily transnational in both scope and structure. Though it is somewhat overdue in historical terms, significant portions of the commercial theatre in English speaking countries and elsewhere are now playing a frantic game of catch-up, deploying mass production models which are virtually unprecedented in the history of live theatrical production. We are witnessing a phenomenon that can only be described as the global-industrialisation of the musical theatre.
The motor behind this process of global-industrialisation is the megamusical - a common term in Canada and one gaining currency in Britain and the United States as well. Megamusicals are stage productions conceived and produced in a style born in the last fifteen years, and are exemplified by the long-running success of Cats, The Phantom of the Opera and Miss Saigon. Most industry insiders mark the megamusical's birth with the opening of Cats in the West End in 1980. Megamusicals are different in important ways from the merely 'big' musicals that preceded them (My Fair Lady, A Chorus Line) or that continue to run in the West End, on Broadway, and on tour internationally (Crazy for You, Kiss of the Spiderwoman). A large musical does not automatically qualify as a megamusical. Unlike their predecessors and contemporary close relations, megamusicals are big global business: capital investments are larger, markets are bigger, more international and more numerous, and stakes are higher than ever before in the history of musical theatre. With the arrival of megamusicals, we have witnessed the attainment of a level of standardisation in production regimes previously unknown in the field of live theatrical production.

Megamusicals thus share a number of essential criteria. These include, first, markets characterised by both rapid global expansion and marked internal growth since 1980. By itself, Les Miserables has been seen by over 40 million people. Second, megamusicals are produced and controlled by a select group of highly capitalised, globally competent and now even transnational players. Pioneer British megamusical producers such as Andrew Lloyd Webber and Cameron Mackintosh, each heading what are now large, diversified and global companies, have lately been joined in the market by Disney. Indeed, the broader field of stage musical production is crowded with new transnational players, including Polygram, Viacom and MCA.

The megamusical's third and most distinctive characteristic is its cultivation of specific commercial, technical and aesthetic models which ensure the meticulous replication of any given production across a number of international venues. The megamusical's rationalising, industrial logic - including a quality-control model implemented and supervised outward from a single metropolitan centre - reproduces technical and artistic production detail with such rigour as to significantly delimit the interpretative agency of local musical performers. Hence the increasing use of terms like cloning, franchising, and McTheatre to describe the megamusical business.
Megamusicals consequently afford a new vantage point from which to survey current trends towards the transnationalisation of cultural production. Here I will consider community responses to a changing theatrical economy in Toronto. In the 1980s Toronto became the world's third largest English-speaking theatre centre, and it did so precisely on the back of the city's success in staging megamusicals. The megamusical in Toronto has grown into a symbol of ideological choice and political action. Megamusicals have fuelled the already well-stoked fires of long-standing left-Canadian positions on American cultural imperialism by providing new flammables from an altogether unexpected source: the field of live-theatrical production. At the same time, for the new right they have come to represent the laudable outcome of an emerging and desirable economic order in the cultural sector.

**Neoconservatism and changing climates of production**

Using the elections of respective conservative governments as a practical benchmark, we can date the consolidation of neoconservatism within Britain, Canada and the United States from the early 1980s onwards. The megamusical's star likewise ascended during this period. Although I do not want to posit too close a correspondence between the megamusical (either as a genre or as an industry) and neoconservatism (either as a method of government or social regulation, or as an ideology), their attendant advances are not entirely coincidental. Though these connections can be seen in London, New York and Toronto (the megamusical's three most stable markets), Toronto's example is the most pronounced and complex. But before taking a close look at conditions in Toronto, we need to consider the broader effects of neoconservatism on cultural policy in all three countries where megamusicals have most prominently established themselves.

In Britain, in order to tilt the provision from public to private, traditionally subsidised sectors had to be destroyed or weakened, which in turn allowed a new inrush of private investment. Nowhere was this clearer, in the cultural ecology of the capital, than in the Thatcherite demolition of the Greater London Council in 1986. Indeed, the GLC's cultural policies provoked a particular hostility amongst true-blue Thatcherites. They may or may not have banked on the arrival of the megamusical; but there is no doubt they were determined to put an end to a range of democratic experiments in the cultural field which were on the threshold
of becoming genuinely popular.

In the United States from 1981 onwards, the forces behind the Reagan administration supplemented deregulation inside and outside the cultural sector with sustained attacks on the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the most important of all government funding bodies for American theatre. Since the mid-1980s the NEA has been presented in neoconservative propaganda as a hot-bed of urine drinking, anti-American homosexual radicals, unworthy of public support. Sustained attacks both on the budget and on the moral credentials of the NEA proved effective in the long term, for it continues to fight for its life under the Clinton administration. And the NEA is not alone. The American Corporation for Public Broadcasting (PBS) is also staggering under an ongoing war of attrition. Moreover, PBS’s struggle to stay alive is now occurring in the context of new American telecommunications legislation which makes de jure the previously de facto revitalisation of trends towards corporate conglomeration in broadcasting.

Attacks like this on the public cultural infrastructure were not common in Canada until Brian Mulroney’s first Progressive Conservative government in 1984. Once in power, the Mulroney Conservatives aimed their bureaucratic and fiscal arsenals at Canada’s cultural institutions with a zeal unknown in the previous Liberal regime, in order to weaken the subsidised cultural sector to the point at which it was less and less able to present a convincing case for the social value of public subsidy for the arts. It was a strategy similar to that employed by the Conservatives in Britain during the 1980s and 90s, as outlined, for example, in the Independent. The components of such a strategy can be outlined as follows: 1) Starve public cultural institutions of funds required to operate even at minimum efficiency. 2) Observe audiences and artists complaining about declining quality. 3) Pronounce all such institutions unfit to manage themselves, which in turn justifies further budget cuts. In such a manner, the Canadian Conservative government managed to reduce grants to the Canada Council, the primary source of public subsidy to theatre, by more than 20 per cent in the course

of its two terms. During the late 1980s and early 90s, as arts organisations across the country faced extended layoffs, severe pay cuts, or bankruptcy, it became clear that the sector's ability to produce work other than for the mass market had been badly weakened.

It was in this newly deforested cultural environment that Canadian productions of megamusicals began to take off, not only to packed houses in Toronto, but on tour in other Canadian and American metropolitan centres as well.

**Broadway, the West End and Toronto**

Although it is shadowed closely by London, New York is the largest theatre centre in the English-speaking world. Broadway's gross theatrical revenues topped US$356 million in 1993/94. Despite this impressive sum, Broadway has been lurching from financial crisis to financial crisis since the mid 1980s. Although Broadway has recently enjoyed increasing audience figures, belief in the financial impossibility of producing around Times Square remains widespread, driven largely by steadily rising entry costs. The omnipresence of British megamusical imports and the decrease in production of new, original non-musical plays have regularly been cited as reasons for rising production thresholds.

Set against this long-term picture of chronic instability are the dramatically improving fortunes of 'the road', a category which comprises all open-ended, limited and touring productions in North America. 1993/94 road receipts brought total North American gross revenues to US$1,044 billion. Despite the perilous nature of sectorial investment, the overall picture for Broadway's entire North American market is one of significant growth. Over the 1980s, as North American industry figures rose steadily toward the $1 billion mark, the live-theatrical (or 'legit') sector grew to sufficient size to interest Disney, Polygram and other transnational - not only in relation to North America, but to Europe, Asia and Australia as well.

During the 1980s, the political economy of London's West End differed from that of Broadway. Although the West End theatre had traditionally benefited conspicuously from the influx of public money and new talent that was the legacy of Keynes and the post-war settlement, the West End's essentially commercial character had remained unchanged. Changing fiscal realities, however, had begun to damage the ecology of subsidised theatre in Britain. The conspicuous success of musicals was only one factor among several regarding the challenges facing contemporary British theatre. Because of the relatively well-entrenched
position of the non-musical commercial play within the West End, rarely if ever was the musical (‘mega-’ or otherwise) positioned as a phenomenon that had the potential to alter the balance between publicly-subsidised and commercial production in Britain, to the irreparable detriment of the subsidised sector.

This was precisely how the megamusical quickly came to be understood in Toronto, however. Theatrical imports have always possessed a singular resonance within English-Canada. This is because an identifiably Canadian theatrical scene only came into existence in Canada’s largest urban centre with government support, and only as recently as the late 1950s. Prior to this, touring British and American shows comprised the greater part of Toronto’s theatrical life. The commercial sector sponsored these touring shows, and state subsidies for theatre were virtually non-existent prior to 1957. Before then, Canadians only very rarely saw their own lives represented on Canadian stages. For these reasons, in English Canada more so than elsewhere, public theatre (benefiting from government subsidy) came invariably to designate indigenous theatre as well. It was in the context of this tradition that, through the 1980s and 90s, English-Canadian journalists, policy makers, theatre workers and audiences debated with increasing passion and regularity the merits and detractions of commercial blockbusters like Cats, Phantom of the Opera and Les Misérables. Public debate about the cultural significance of the megamusical went to the heart of the debate about the newly emergent ‘free market for culture’.

All the world’s a stage: Toronto’s battle of the paradigms

At the forefront of these debates in Toronto was the prestigious conservative national daily, the Globe and Mail. Its 1993 editorial heralding the Toronto premiere of Miss Saigon exemplifies the contest for legitimacy between the city’s newly maturing commercial theatre scene and its previously pre-eminent subsidised one. The editorial’s first sentence announced:

Last night’s opening of Miss Saigon, the latest mega-musical to play Toronto, not only marks the launch of a new theatrical spectacle, but heralds Toronto’s arrival as a major theatrical centre.²

Significantly, the Globe presented the contest between Toronto’s two theatrical sectors as a zero-sum game, characterising each sector in oppositional terms. Ignoring the

trend towards the presentation of more commercial productions within subsidised houses, the Globe portrayed subsidised theatre as a sclerotic integument from a previous era, stuck on a body politic otherwise newly invigorated by free markets in virtually every sphere of production. 'For too long', the editorial declared, too much of Toronto's theatrical community has behaved as if the theatre would be a wonderful thing if it weren't for the audience.

The Globe summarised the city's theatre history 'BC ('before Cats') as elitist and irrelevant to its citizenry, offering up 'theatre as therapy', where - it argued - the people wanted real entertainment.

In contrast, commercial theatrical production was portrayed as inherently virtuous. The Globe's depiction of the sector was exultantly populist, rejoicing in the fact that 'Toronto is suddenly bristling with large commercial theatres, most of them opened in the last decade and all of them seemingly packed every night'. In a manoeuvre consistent with neoconservative conviction, market demand was tendered throughout as the final arbiter of cultural value. Thus the Globe celebrated 'Toronto's arrival as a major theatrical centre', notwithstanding the fact that this new major theatrical centre's successes were based upon the purchase and reproduction of theatrical spectaculars already running in New York and in London, and in Hamburg and Melbourne and elsewhere as well. As left-leaning commentator Rick Salutin observed the following day, the Toronto production of Miss Saigon would appear to herald the city's 'arrival', 'because we've got version No. 5 (after London, New York, Tokyo and Chicago)'. In fact, insofar as market demand functions as a principal arbiter of social value within neoconservative thought, these very attributes heightened the megamusical's stature and celebrity.

The editorial also introduced an aesthetic comparison between government-built auditoria, in which many subsidised companies performed, and the newly-inaugurated theatre housing Miss Saigon, privately owned by impresario David Mirvish. Theatres built in the 1960s and the 1970s with public funds suffered from an 'institutional banality we have come to expect from public architecture.' In contrast, the Globe

3. A classic and concise Canadian formulation of this central tenet of neoconservative philosophy, observable in all three national contexts is elsewhere delivered by Globe and Mail editorial writer Andrew Coyne: 'When one pays for a work of art... that does not vulgarize or commodify it: it sanctifies it', Ideas: Culture and the Marketplace, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1993, p45.

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described Mirvish's new hall as 'a humanist theatre, one that delights the senses at every turn' - driven, moreover, 'by the need for intimacy between audience and performers, not by the architect's ego'. State-supported theatrical production implicitly mirrored the dull, state-built theatres in which they could be found.

Perhaps most troubling to many in the theatrical community was the editorial's suggestion that the megamusical was developing a theatrical infrastructure in Toronto where none had existed before. According to the Globe, the megamusical was creating an infrastructure of theatrical talent: actors, singers, dancers, musicians, directors, producers, technical people, all of them developing their craft in an atmosphere of professionalism.

For many of those involved in the construction of recognisably Canadian theatre in Toronto from the 1960s, the suggestion that commercial theatre was the primary vehicle within which they developed their craft was dangerously unhistorical; the insinuation that only in commercial theatre was an 'atmosphere of professionalism' to be discovered, insulting. The history of theatrical production in Toronto was in fact widely acknowledged to be very different. Far from commercial capital providing a needed industrial platform, it was the very presence in Toronto of a pre-existing, publicly-constructed infrastructure - comprising both talent and fixed capital - that eventually provided the conditions which enabled the commercial theatre boom to happen. Even Miss Saigon's Toronto producer, David Mirvish, accepts this interpretation of events, and proffers it in his regular lobbying for the reinstitution of adequate government support for Canadian theatre. On these occasions Mirvish insists, as does London-based megamusical producer Cameron Mackintosh in his own regular exhortations to British parliamentary committees, that the relationship between publicly-supported theatre and its commercial counterpart is symbiotic, rather than oppositional. Commercial theatre, Mirvish insists, continues to rely on the seedbed of skill and talent that the public-theatrical infrastructure supplies.

The Globe's paean to the virtues of free-market theatrical production can thus be said to have outstripped the views and interests even of commercial producers in order to further a broader political agenda. In Toronto and within English Canada that broader agenda possesses one further distinctive attribute that requires illumination.

The megamusical as political marker

In English Canada, a complex set of conflations were fashioned into a simple
opposition. On the one hand was the publicly supported cultural sector which was Canadian, and on the other a commercial cultural sector which was global. In a conspicuous homology, political discourse in English Canada during the 1980s came to position the English-Canadian left as explicitly 'nationalist', while Canadian neoconservatism was seen to be decidedly 'continentalist' both in its economic programmes and in its cultural predilections.

Until the 1990s, neoconservatism in English Canada, unlike in Britain or in the United States, was not characterised by strong appeals to the idea of nation, tradition or patriotism, appeals that had elsewhere sought to counterbalance the destabilising effects of deregulation of social life by calling upon allegiance to the imagined community of the nation. Nor were parallel xenophobic strategies regularly touted regarding the restriction of immigration; nor covertly statist ones invoked regarding the strengthening of policing; nor protectionist measures demanded against foreign imports or corporations. All of these strategies - save the last, which was and remains largely the objective of American supporters of Buchanan, Perot et al - were embraced by neoconservatives in Britain and the United States.

Instead, Canadian neoconservatism hitched its fortunes unequivocally to the wagon of deregulated trade with the United States, and to the idea of continental integration. Though they avoided overt discussion of political union, Canadian continentalist elites discussed - and continue to discuss - continental integration both in terms of economic policy and social programmes. Thanks in large part to the inability of the English-Canadian left to formulate coherent strategies allowing for a continental integration of national economies toward progressive ends the idea of continental cooperation congealed as the exclusive terrain of the pan-Canadian right, and a newly confident pan-Canadian business class. Appeals to any sort of attenuated - nationalism virtually became the exclusive property of the English-Canadian left.5

5. Contemporary English-Canadian left-nationalism is uniquely configured. It asserts the value of state intervention in matters social and economic; it eschews conventional ethnic patriotism in favour of celebrating Canada's multicultural reality and its conspicuous, regional 'senses of place' from sea to sea to sea; until the 1990s it entirely embraced the task of building consensus between Quebec and English Canada; and crucially, it defines an ideal Canada in negative relation to the United States and its perceived jingoism and atomistic social philosophy. As a result of these composite characteristics, English-Canadian left-nationalism has been described by some as paradoxically post-modern. Readers interested in this aspect of English-Canadian left-nationalism might begin with B.W. Powe's (occasionally maudlin) poetic treatise, A Tremendous Canada of Light, Toronto, 1993.
It is within this larger frame of reference that the megamusical accrued its deeper meanings in relation to Canadian politics during the 1980s. Its supporters, mostly positioned on the continentalist right, did more than hail its emergence as a sign of a maturing cultural marketplace, its social value gauged in all-important market terms. As the first sentence of the *Globe* editorial implied, Canadian neoconservatives had additional cause to salute the emergence of megamusicals because the shows were laudably ‘global’ in both form and content - that is, similar if not practically identical to parallel productions in New York, Los Angeles, Vienna, London, Singapore and elsewhere.

Most of the megamusical’s detractors were accordingly located on the nationalist left. Left *intelligents* were customarily disdainful of megamusicals because of their status as cultural imports from Canada’s former imperial master; in other instances they were critical because their cultural value was gauged by the marketplace and not by the *polis*. But most important, the marketplace in which the megamusical’s value was gauged was the *global* marketplace, and in Canada even more than elsewhere, global markets have been automatically understood as American ones. Thus until the arrival in 1995 in Toronto of the first American megamusical, *Disney’s Beauty and the Beast*, British megamusicals often took on honorary status as American imports. This is entirely understandable, given that both Lloyd Webber and Mackintosh control their North American operations out of New York.

From early on, left-nationalist critiques of the megamusical were organised not only from the perspective of audience, but from the perspective of the actors as well. Members of the English-Canadian theatrical community were prominent among the critics of the megamusical. The term ‘McTheatre’ acquired cachet in this circle, invoking as much the new experience of working on what was perceived as a ‘theatrical assembly-line’ as it did the (often only imagined) experience of attending a show that conformed to the expectations of a cultural McDonalds.

In Toronto, *Les Miserables*, for example, was dismissed by most on the left as an exercise in the commodification and sterilisation of the revolutionary impulse; as homogenised in sound and utterance, utterly incapable of generating any significant meaning. In 1989, in the then left-liberal national magazine, *Saturday Night*, theatre critic Robert Cushman put forward a considered reflection on what
he termed an 'international neutrality' pervasive in the aesthetics of the still-new megamusical genre. He went on to comment: 'Most of Act Two of Les Mis is devoted to revolution. Does anybody know who is revolting against whom, or why.'

It was within the logic of this distinctive system of legitimation that the megamusical acquired two kinds of social value in Canada, each corresponding to broader positions on contemporary political issues. The English-Canadian left-nationalist position, intensely critical of the new genre and its connected industry, shares some characteristics with criticisms levelled at the megamusical in other locations, but it also possesses an additional level of analysis that is not significantly present in either New York or in London. The objection that Canadian critics share with megamusical detractors elsewhere is the 'McTheatre' critique, accusing routinised global cultural production of producing a concomitantly homogenised cultural product. Thus Cushman is able to speak of a 'pervasive blandness' permeating the works of the 'Lloyd Webber school', in much the same way as critics in Britain and the US.

In Toronto this critique has acquired a new twist, triggering discussion about the ways in which Canada's two imperial powers (the ascendant US and the declining UK) continue to exercise control not only over cultural production in the hinterland, but also its meanings and values. It also rejects the (global) market as exclusive arbiter of cultural value. The English-Canadian left-nationalist critique of the megamusical thus names a sector of cultural production previously unconnected with the drive of cultural imperialism.

In a similar fashion, right-wing Canadian champions of the megamusical share their general appeals to populism with megamusical advocates in other cities. But in addition, the megamusical functioned in Canada as a legitimating vehicle for the emerging commercial sector of live-theatrical production: its status as a globally celebrated commodity lent it its credibility.

6. Robert Cushman, 'Musical Chairs', *Saturday Night*, January 1989. It is worth mentioning that when David Mirvish moved *Les Miserables* from Toronto to Montreal and opened it in Quebecois French, other highly politicised groups immediately and wholeheartedly embraced the show as their own. According to Canadian company manager Eric Goldstein, significant numbers of *independentiste* actors and audiences interpreted what remained a highly standardised production - notwithstanding its re-translation - as a clarion call to the separatist cause. The English-Canadian left-nationalist characterisation of *Les Miserables* as a production void of any revolutionary impulse had fewer supporters in Quebec. Instead, Quebecois performers and their fans often chose to read *Les Mis* as a text charged with local, radical meaning.
Concluding confessions of a reluctant Broadway Baby

Despite my own long-held position as a Canadian cultural nationalist, I have always had a passion for Broadway. This ought to indicate a great deal, given the hostile, occasionally predetermined and characteristically English-Canadian response I regularly experience when confronted with the constant wash of American cultural products over Canadian airwaves, along cable, or on Canadian cinema screens. Yet as a teenager in Canada, when watching Broadway shows or those of the West End in the days prior to the megamusical, I rarely if ever found myself ‘chafing under the bridle of an occupying power’. And in noting this absence, I know I was not alone. Despite the stark ideological and structural obstacles of colonial residualism (vis a vis the United Kingdom) or neo-colonialism (vis a vis the United States) that did objectively face Canadian producers brave enough to mount local work prior to the arrival of the megamusical era, a touring Broadway show, for many Toronto audiences and performers alike, rarely stood as an effective marker of coca-colonization. This almost certainly had something to do with its character as a live-theatrical event. Until recently, live theatre had a quality of singularity about it that seemed to exclude it from being seen as a force for global cultural homogenisation.

Yet it would be a mistake to adopt the cultural imperialism/McTheatre critique wholesale: within the world of the megamusical, neither aesthetic homogenisation nor wholly alienating work practices are universal, nor are they inevitable. And enquiries into the global-industrialisation of the musical need to scrutinise carefully those moments of nuance, interpretation and resistance to ‘assembly-line’ production that continue to occur.

But to ignore the forest for the trees would likewise be an error: despite moments of subversion, ‘Fings Ain't Wot They Used t’Be’ in the field of live-theatrical production. The global theatre industry continues to transform itself in ways that affect our lives to a degree still only properly acknowledged by its own players.

I want to thank my sister, Varda Burstyn, for her important contributions to this piece, and for the lifelong example she has set for me in activism and in scholarship.