

The Golden Ticket for a Hit Show

The Arts Team dissect and explore some of the prevailing trends in some of the past decade's biggest West End hits

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Tuesday 2 October 2018



Image Credit: ATG Tickets

Every play has to be original and different in its own right, but now and again a few trends can be spotted. Long-running musicals such as *The Book of Mormon* and *Everybody's Talking About Jamie* prove that audiences will still show up in droves for a decent crowd-pleaser. More dialogue heavy stage plays, such as Jez Butterworth's *The Ferryman* and Martin McDonagh's brilliant *Hangmen* sold out almost entirely for their whole run (*Hangmen* is now being transferred to New York and *The Ferryman's* wild success merited it an additional run on the West End with a whole new cast). Looking at a small handful of successes over the past couple of years gives some insight into some of the elements that seem to properly make an audience tick.

1) CHARACTERS

Lovers of Tom Stoppard might want to shed a few tears of loss because if there's one thing that the last couple of years have shown us, it's that a hit play on the West End rarely comes in the form of a bunch of 'Middle England' academics debating at length the weightier aspects of science and theology. From the rock 'n' roll loving Northern Irish family in *The Ferryman* to the brazenly swearsy Mancunian pub regulars of *Hangmen*, the biggest plays on the West End seem designed to feature the sort of characters who were notably absent from the theatre scene a decade or so back. Looking to the peripheries of society seems to be the go-to tactic for any playwright wishing to create a stir across theatreland. In the comedy drama *Jerusalem* a colourful cast of outlaws, junkies and straight-up weirdos propelled what sounded like a fringe theatre hit into one of the most critically acclaimed West End successes of recent years. By populating your play with an array of full-blooded and entertaining personalities, you're onto a winner.

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2) SETTING

Much of theatre can function as a type of escapism, an opportunity to enjoy a few hours of good jokes, eye-popping musical numbers and a few drinks in some of the most brilliant theatrical venues across the country. That being said, audiences still crave something interesting to chew over, so a good and unique setting can often support this. Falling roughly into the same criteria as good characters, a gripping setting seems best supported by being unusual, intriguing and visually interesting for the audience.

A play's setting can be helped tenfold by an inventive director and production team; this is where the majority of cash seems to go on the truly enormous West End hits. Unless the script at the centre of the production is something properly special, then some considerable time and effort has to be put into making the audience feel as immersed as possible through set-design and management. This can take the form of some unconventional means, whether that be in the set design or the utilisation of the production space. The Bridge Theatre achieved fame and notoriety with their production of *Julius Caesar*, where the play's actors physically interacted with audience members during some of the play's more intense sequences. On top of this, the elaborate stage had props and sets appearing via a system of trapdoors.

A more fun, and arguably more ambitious, example was demonstrated by the long-running musical *The Book of Mormon* in its use of a rural Ugandan village as the setting for the most outrageous action sequences and musical numbers this side of South Park. This was a setting that not only catered to giving us a diverse, unique cast of characters but also provided the means for certainly one of the more original stories of this century. Speaking of which...

3) STORY

This is where the generalisations start coming thick and fast because the type of stories told on the West End are obviously as varied as the plays themselves (if you start looking for similarities between *Avenue Q* and *Les Miserables* you'll be up all night). But if there's one thing that the past few years have proven, it's that theatre is more than capable of telling the kind of narratives previously thought to be the sole reserve of cinema. In bygone days, theatre companies were hamstrung by a lack of technical resources, leaving cinema to do the more spectacular stuff. Now, however, ambitious practical effects and set design mean that complex storylines can now be easily catered to; plays like James Graham's *Quiz* and *Ink* utilized changing locations and unconventional storytelling to become rolling successes, while *Hangmen* had three highly diverse locations. Plays set in a fixed location are naturally still rife but even these frequently feature heavy doses of sometimes Tarantino-esque action and violence.

4) THE CAST

If word of mouth fails then there's one thing any play can rely on: a notable, preferably millennial-friendly, A-list star to put on the poster. Take Ian McKellen as Lear, or Cumberbatch as Hamlet, for examples. While these actors are undoubtedly talented, they are frequently used as a crutch in productions that may have lost their edge in the modern age (cough, *Killer Joe*, cough). Big names should be used in conjunction with great productions but the former alone can't hope to elevate every other aspect of the show's production.

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the hugely successful *One Man, Two Guvnors*, and, after standing in for him on four nights during the run, was offered the lead for the following season, to immense critical acclaim. He proved that an A-lister

In 2012, the relatively unknown Owain Arthur acted as James Corden's understudy for

alone is not crucial to the success of the script. A truly great production should be able to work independently without those blokes off *Sherlock*, *Doctor Who* or (insert some other primetime BBC drama).

So there we have it, an attempt to find some common factors between the theatrical successes of recent years; not quite the crystal clear formula for a hit we were hoping to unearth but perhaps something to mull over.

There are, of course, factors too complex to write about within the length of this article; many hits have to come along at the right time in order to chime with political and social circumstances (*Consent* at the National in the wake of the #MeToo movement is a prime example). But when all's said and done, productions in search of record ticket sales amid an already competitive theatrical culture must single themselves out through original stories, engaging direction, and interesting characters.

...Or failing that, at least manage to cast someone like Tom Hiddleston.



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