

The French Musicals: The Dramatic Impulse of *Spectacle*

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The appellation increasingly applied to French musicals is *spectacle*. French musicals differ from their contemporary English and German language cousins in that their techniques and artistry come not predominantly from theatre, but from show business. In a culture that has been critically antagonistic to the musical genre over the past decades, *les spectacles musicaux*¹ have nonetheless had extraordinary success in Europe and Canada. While the blockbuster musicals, globally produced, including *Les Misérables* (1985) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986), which seemed ubiquitous in the 1980s and early 90s, found no substantial audience base in France; at the turn of the century there is evidence of a substantial musical theatre originating in the French language. In this article, I focus on two of the most successful of the recent musicals, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1998) and *Roméo & Juliette* (2000). Both are *spectacles*, as at home on the stage as on MTV, DVD, or CD.

The term, *spectacle*, is itself applied to divergent styles and genres of entertainment. A close translation is simply “show.” The appellation is not in consistent use and the musical theatre described has also been referred to as *opéra-rock* and *comédie musicale*, as rock opera and musical comedy are used in English. The English use of “spectacle” actually approximates *spectacle*, but is often used in specific reference to the *mise en scène* of blockbuster musicals, defined by the complexity and expense of sets and special effects. The emergence of *les spectacles musicaux* has defined a specific trend in French musical based largely on the tension between *mise en scène* and popular music.

The majority of writing on theatrical musicals, and indeed on film musicals, has centred on America, particularly the “golden age” dominated by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, excluding those European composers and lyricists who have had international success over the last three decades. Furthermore, from the late 1960s, rock music began to influence tangibly the theatrical musical with *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970), *Hair* (1968), *The Who's Tommy* (1969), and

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Godspell (1971). In the 1980 edition of Richard Kislán's *The Musical: A Look at the American Musical Theatre*, he writes: "Although the rock musical regaled the public with exciting sounds that captured the spirit of the times, its theatre proved all too inconsiderable," proposing that "the rock opera frenzy initiated by *Tommy* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* declined simultaneously with the popularity of those productions."² The rock opera, however, has largely re-emerged in the French *spectacle musical*, whose authors have been influenced, to some extent, by this earlier period. Definition of the rock musical's theatre has been problematic, for the musical's innovation and impetus are not located in the theatre at all, but in the recording studio.

The French *spectacle musical* maintains the recording tradition of the rock opera. *Jesus Christ Superstar*, for example, as one of the first sung-through musicals was initially produced on a double record to create theatrical interest and used the styles of contemporary popular music to carry the drama on record. The sung-through musicals that followed were, however, redefined by theatrical professionals. Theatrical producers, directors, and designers like Trevor Nunn, John Napier, and Cameron Mackintosh became increasingly influential on the theatrical performance of the musicals. The blockbuster era became defined by operatic scores and expensive set designs recreating falling chandeliers, helicopters, and Beverly Hills mansion staircases on the stage. Rock was largely subsumed by the stagecraft of opera and dramatic theatre.

At the forefront of the blockbuster period, however, were two French writers, Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg. Their musical, *Les Misérables*, is one of the longest running blockbuster musicals and Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright, reflecting the common perception, write: "*Les Misérables* has played successfully all over the world except, with a poetic irony, in Paris."³ A measure of distinction, however, proves useful in measuring the success of *Les Misérables* in France. The Cameron Mackintosh produced *Les Misérables* (1985) was somewhat unsuccessful in a Paris run (1991), but the original *Les Misérables* (1980), which played at the Palais des Sports, Paris, did virtually sell out.⁴ The latter production followed their first musical, *La Révolution Française* (1973), the first staged French rock opera, likewise a double gold album. Its strident rock chords and the slippage between rock, folk, and jazz vocals are influenced by the music dramaturgy created in recordings like *Jesus Christ Superstar*. The original *Les Misérables*, which would later evolve into a more operatic score with recitative, likewise utilised slippage between popular music styles. The use of well-known narrative material, familiar already to most audiences from history and classic literature including Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, furthermore placed the emphasis on the musicals' abilities to interpret the material in a new way—rather than on communicating the narrative in the first instance—through the juxtapositions of music influences elaborating

the events and characters in song. This trend would be taken up in the evolution of French musical theatre.

Like the original production of *Les Misérables*, the later French musicals rely not on performance in traditional theatres. Susan Bennett writes: “While some of the more recent designs for cultural institutions (such as the Pompidou Centre in Paris) have attempted democratization, architectural styles of theatres are generally recognizable as representing high culture.”⁵ The French musicals are not chiefly staged in traditional theatrical architectural spaces, but in areas in which concerts, conferences, sporting events, or other popular entertainment can take place. The theatre of the musicals, therefore, takes place outside solely theatrical space and within the popular arena. While, for instance, the original *Les Misérables* was performed in a multipurpose space, the Cameron Mackintosh production was in contrast created in conjunction with the Royal Shakespeare Company, one of the foremost British theatrical companies, and many of the company’s professionals, including Nunn. The production was associated with high culture and the British theatrical establishment represented by the Barbican Theatre where the production was premiered in October 1985,⁶ even though the production itself is largely recognised as middlebrow.

This placement of musicals within traditional theatres has led to an uneasy relationship between the stage’s theatrical orientation toward high culture and the populism of the musical itself. The French musicals have utilised stages with more democratic purpose and have themselves adapted to the mechanics and expectations of the stages they inhabit. Pop driven, the songs are themselves able to compete individually in the music industry, and the scores and thus the dramaturgy do not incorporate song and scene cohesively, but idiosyncratically as in MTV and pop concerts.

While Boublil and Schönberg continued to have their productions produced in England, Luc Plamondon, a Québécois lyricist, began working from the *Jesus Christ Superstar/Hair* tradition. While writing successful contemporary pop songs for a range of French language recording artists, he also collaborated on musicals including *Starmania* (1978) and *La Légende de Jimmy* (1990), both with music by Michel Berger. The shows establish a number of pop songs, *Starmania* including several commercial hits and popular standards, within a revised theatrical context that absorbs the extravagances and idioms of popular music and popular culture. These were shows that before Jonathan Larson’s Pulitzer Prize winning *Rent* (1996) incorporated microphones and pop references, with characters including groupies and sex symbols, and themes covering the disenchantment with contemporary society, *Starmania* including the hit “*Le Monde Est Stone*” (“The World Is Stone”), which among other versions was performed by Garou in a video clip, directed by Alain DesRochers, depicting news style footage of war, riot, and poverty.

Plamondon's *Notre-Dame de Paris*, created with composer Richard Cocciante, was introduced through the recording industry, first performed in concert at MIDEM, an international fair for the industry, in January 1998. By the theatrical premiere of *Notre-Dame de Paris* in September 1998 at the *Palais des Congrès de Paris*, the canticle, "*Belle*" ("Beauty"), was already a hit song with more than 2.5 million singles sold. Like Plamondon and Cocciante's *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Gérard Presgurvic's *Roméo & Juliette* was first released through the recording industry in 2000. Presgurvic himself wrote film soundtracks and French pop songs, including an early French rap song. Songs from the musical were released as broadcast video clips, including the French number two, "*Les Rois du Monde*" ("The Kings of the World"). The primacy of the songs, as evinced in the ways in which the musical is released via the music industry and the commercial success of individual songs, has a particular effect on the way the *mise en scène* is realised on the stage. Where the blockbusters evince the physical manifestation of the narrative's setting, the French musicals have developed a relationship between song and the *mise en scène* that refines the aurality of the narrative, rather than the constructs of the fictional environment.

Central to the musical has always been the fracturing of dialogue and *mise en scène* with song and dance. Yet, unlike opera or ballet, song and dance in the musical is usually subordinated to the drama. In the non-through-sung musical, the "burst" into song and dance would imply a removal from the "normal" dramatic stage, creating what Martin Sutton argues as "the romantic/rogue imagination and its daily battle with a restraining, 'realistic,' social order. This battle grows out of a tension between realistic plot and spectacle/fantasy number."⁷ In the through-sung blockbusters where there is no break between song and speech, the tension is displaced as *mise en scène* and performance become themselves increasingly realistic to offset the sung delivery, consequently leading to the expensive stage machinery of recreation. The French musicals, developing from rock operas, maintain the operatic balance: the songs become the dominant aesthetic, dictating the performance.

Rick Altman provides a useful parallel in his description of climaxes in the Busby Berkeley film musical where "we have entirely abandoned the representational mode. *Everything—even the image—is now subordinated to the music track.*"⁸ Altman argues that a "reversal of the image/sound hierarchy lies at the very center of the musical genre."⁹ In film, this indicates the camera work and choreography accompanying the diegetic music of the soundtrack. In the theatre, those musicals which emerged not from theatrical milieus, but from the music industry, in particular attain the extremes achieved by Berkeley in film as "symbolic of the musical's most fundamental configurations."¹⁰ For these musicals, the songs are the musical and what occurs on stage is configured according to the songs, rather than the narrative as in traditional Broadway or blockbuster musicals.

The tension between *mise en scène* and score is the key to the French *spectacles musicaux*: narrative is produced through this tension. Patrice Pavis writes: “*Mise en scène* and its reception by the spectator depend on the perception of the different rhythms of visual and stage discourse and the auditory and textual flow.”¹¹ In musical theatre, the rhythms are explicit, song being a discourse that orders the performance and that likewise incorporates both the visual and verbal. Thus lighting and set cues, vocal cues, and key narrative moments are all linked to the cues built into the songs. The use of song creates a particular ‘exchange’ between the visual and verbal that goes to Pavis’s description:

Mise en scène is always a parable on the impossible exchange between the verbal and non-verbal: the non-verbal (i.e. staging and the choice of a situation of enunciation) makes the verbal text speak, reduplicating its utterance, as if the dramatic text, by being uttered on stage, were able to comment on itself, without the help of another text, by giving prominence to what is said and what is shown.¹²

Yet, in *les spectacles musicaux*, the utterance is itself rhythmic: it is not speech, but rhythm that is directly commented upon.

The *mise en scène* of *Notre-Dame de Paris* comments upon the pop, soul, blues, classical, and jazz rhythms of the songs. The main characters wear microphone headsets that materially signify their status as “singers.” The design by Christian Rätz recalls rock concerts, using mammoth set pieces and open spaces that simultaneously isolate and clarify the performers on the stage and register the scale of the performance as an “event.” The chorus is constituted not of actors or singers in designated characters, but of a corps of dancers choreographed by Martino Müller, who articulate the rhythms. The music is played through a sound system rather than by a live orchestra, allowing for the transmission of contemporary popular music, which is largely studio-based, while also elevating the music from other performance elements to the overriding, controlling rhythm to which all performance is subordinated. The consequent performance appears removed from the Victor Hugo novel from which it is adapted, but as Pavis argues:

With every new *mise en scène*, the text is placed in a situation, of enunciation according to the new Social Context of its reception, which allows or facilitates a new analysis of the text and so on, *ad infinitum*. This theoretical ‘fitting,’ this discrepancy between text and stage, the disparity between the reading of yesterday’s Social Context and that of today, constitute the *mise en scène*.¹³

Hugo's novel operates on the disparity between 1831, the time of its publication, and the Medieval context in which the narrative is set, describing a gargoyle-like bell ringer, Quasimodo, who falls in love with a beautiful gypsy, Esmeralda, herself in love with a handsome captain, Phoebus. The desire of the priest, Frollo, for the gypsy acts as a catalyst to a tragic ending through which Hugo deliberates on the courts and capital punishment. *Notre-Dame de Paris* operates on the disparity between the contemporary social context of asylum-seekers, protest movements, and globalisation, read through its pop score and the *mise en scène* dictated by the score, and the reading of Hugo's text.

The set design explicates the tension of the disparity. A wall of vast blocks represents the cathedral of Notre-Dame. This is not a recreation or imitation of the Gothic architecture of the cathedral. The wall serves the rhythms of the performance, with footholds and grips for abseiling choreography, blocks that move to form archways, secondary walls, and platforms for solos. The wall is reminiscent of the walls built on stages during Pink Floyd's *The Wall* tour, symbolising the themes of alienation elaborated in the group's songs. Such themes are central to the adaptation of Hugo's classic. Although *Notre-Dame de Paris* recognises its Medieval narrative setting, the opening number, "*Le Temps des Cathédrales*" ("The Time of the Cathedrals"), slides the imagery of the great, Gothic cathedrals, which dominated socio-politically and architecturally the cities of the Medieval era, into the contemporary landscape of concrete and glass skyscrapers, that likewise dominate the cities of the contemporary era, commentating on the human relationship to the towering façades of the establishment: "*l'homme a voulu monter vers les étoiles / écrire son histoire / dans le verre ou dans la pierre*" (man wanted to reach the stars / to write his history/ in glass or in stone). The song likewise reiterates and commentates on the epochal nature of the relationship: "*La foule des barbares/ est aux portes de la ville / laissez entrer ces païens, ces vandales / la fin de ce monde / est prévue pour l'an deux mille*" (The barbarian masses / are at the gates of the city / let these pagans, these vandals enter / the end of this world / is predicted for the year 2000). The song detects the socio-political implications of the movement of refugees in the globalised world in the epochal "doom" of the millennium, commentating on Hugo's outlaws and lawless through contemporary urban ideological conflicts over international law.

The same sliding is in evidence throughout the production. Hugo's gypsies, who are homeless beggars and thieves, are on stage *sans-papiers*, refugees and illegal immigrants, who seek asylum, playing on the ancient tradition of sanctuary embodied by the cathedral. The Court of Miracles, where Hugo's gypsies congregate deep within the city streets, is an industrial construction site of metal barrels and steel girders. The soldiers use batons and metal barriers to control protestors. Tension is maintained between the urban context of Medieval Paris and that of contemporary Paris. Pavis distinguishes the ideotextual *mise en scène*: "It is not so much the text

itself that is staged, but the political, social and especially psychological subtext, almost as if the metatext—i.e. the analysis of the work—sought to take the place of the actual text.”¹⁴ This is certainly what is occurring in a *spectacle musical* like *Notre-Dame de Paris*, where performance is, in a sense, metatext of a recognisable, indeed, iconic, original text. The metatext is manifest in the songs, to which the *mise en scène* is itself subordinated. The text of the musical itself becomes elastic, for the text as represented by the lyrics is wrought through the song rhythms and achieves a duality: representing both the original text and the metatext that comments upon it, the word and the note.

The words, whether as text or lyric, are themselves subordinated to their performance. Altman again provides a parallel, arguing that largely “the film musical depends on dialogue that is resolutely prosaic, resorting to rhyme only for those special moments when language is transformed by music.”¹⁵ The musical performance removes the words from their typical linguistic context: “Instead of thought, words become sound.”¹⁶ *Les spectacles musicaux* actually heighten the performance of the words, the text, as sound. The lyrics, however, rely not simply on the musical effect on rhyme, but on the musical qualities possible in the words themselves. During “Lune” (“Moon”) in *Notre-Dame de Paris*, the voice of Gringoire, performed by Bruno Pelletier, rises with the sound of “lune” and “d’amour” to resonate like the howl of an animal at the moon: “*rugir le coeur / de la bête humaine*” (howling, the heart / of the human beast). The musical quality of the word in part displaces the word itself as signifier, elaborating the metatext. Thus, how the word is sung becomes more important than the word sung.

The score itself reflects back on the Medieval tradition of canticles and liturgies through popular music with its varied musical and technical influences. These influences define the meanings of words and, as words combine in lyric, of narrative. The singing of words thus becomes the discourse through which the meaning of the word is ultimately understood. Likewise, the characters are not “acted” by actors, but sung by performers. The original production of *Notre-Dame de Paris* cast voices, characters determined by vocal style. The role of Clopin, king of thieves, for example, was written with black Canadian reggae star, Luck Mervil, in mind. Mervil, originally from Haiti, physically and vocally embodies the socio-political undertones evident in Plamondon and Cocciante’s score. “*La Cour des Miracles*” (“Court of Miracles”) explicates racial tensions in the dissident descant, Clopin singing “*puisque nous sommes tous des gibiers de potence*” (since we are all the prey of the gallows), linking the outlawry of the *sans-papiers* in *La Cour des Miracles* with their racial designation: “*nous sommes de la même race / la race des gens qui passent*” (we are of the same race/ the race of people who pass through), thumping his bared chest to emphasise “*la couleur de ma peau contre celle de ta peau*” (the colour of my skin against that of your skin). The casting of a reggae voice in the role of Clopin acts as both a visual and aural signifier, the



Garou as Quasimodo in "Les Cloches"
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Luck Mervil as Clopin in "La Cour des miracles"
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syncopated, pulsing rhythms of Clopin's songs identifying them with the social concerns of the reggae genre. Mervil himself recorded "*La Cour des Miracles*" as "*Les Sans-Papier*" on his solo album, *Luck Mervil*, with a rap interlude that includes such lines as "I always feel like someone's watching my immigrant butt" and "soon I will be treated like a man, not a baboon", reiterating the socio-political themes in the song's theatrical incarnation.¹⁷

The original casting of Esmeralda likewise based the character on an ethnically-charged voice, casting Israeli pop/folk/jazz singer, Noa. Although appearing at the MIDEM premiere and on the original recording,¹⁸ Noa withdrew before the theatrical premiere. The recasting of the role with H el ene Segara evinced a significant redirection in the characterisation, Segara's vocal style akin to pop. The relationship of the pop vocal to the love song, however, forms a locus for the troubling romantic associations of the gypsy as both idealistic lover and object of sexual desire. The sentiment, "*vivre / pour celui qu'on aime*" (to live / for the one you love), present in the lyric content works well with the pop voice.¹⁹

It is the rhythm and blues/soul voice that characterises Esmeralda's unrequited lover, Quasimodo, the romantic angst of blues and soul operating in a musical dialogic with the romantic sentiment of pop. Originating the role of Quasimodo, Garou has a deep, gravely tone that expresses the anguish of the bell ringer in his monstrous form, "*Dieu que le monde est injuste / lui si beau et moi si laid*" (God the world is unjust / he so beautiful and me so ugly). Quasimodo's other vital relationship is with the cathedral itself and this relationship is likewise signified in Quasimodo's songs. In "*Les Cloches*" ("The Bells") and "*Dieu que le Monde est Injuste*" ("God the World is Unjust"), instrumental amplification and reverberation create an aural effect similar to that of the "wall of sound," a studio technique that became the hallmark of producer Phil Spector in the 1960s. The "wall of sound" is an aural signifier, creating a musical surge behind Quasimodo's song that suggests the walls of Notre-Dame throb to his voice, the bells reverberating to his words.

The sound of the cathedral is quite different in the songs of Frollo, the priest who desires Esmeralda sexually. Frollo's song is circumscribed by religious symbolism. When he expresses lust, he does so in terms of *The Song of Solomon*, calling forth images of Esmeralda's *jardin* (garden). Performed by Daniel Lavoie, Frollo's voice is itself relentlessly authoritative, the voice of a man descanting from behind a pulpit, the pulpit an aural rather than physical presence in the *mise en sc ene*. In written form, his lyrics are overtly monotonous, with notable repetition of words, "*tu vas me d e truire*" (you will destroy me) and "* tre pr tre et aimer une femme*" (to be a priest and to love a woman), and the musical phrases themselves. The repetition expresses aurally the incessant tones of a man who sermonises, an obsessive man, returning to the same idea again and again, a man of the cloth accustomed to the solemn strains of monastic liturgy, a man attempting to conceal a desire that threatens his very soul. When his desire is finally released in song,

"*je t'aime*" ("I love you") breaks from the sombre chants as an unearthly howl, the pitch of his voice forcing Esmeralda to cover her ears.

The walls of Notre-Dame physically respond to Frollo's voice in the *mise en scène*. During Frollo's performance of "*Tu Vas Me Détruire*" ("You Will Destroy Me"), as Frollo spies upon Esmeralda inside the cathedral, the walls 'dance' to the rhythms of his voice. Blocks disengage from the vast backdrop and move either side of Frollo as he repeats "*tu vas me détruire*", the inhale and exhale of the rhythm elaborated in the movement of the blocks as he pushes them back and they draw back in upon him, then follow him as he moves across the stage, maintaining him within their shadow. Where the walls resonate to the voice of Quasimodo, the ringer of the cathedral bells, the walls physically encroach upon Frollo, its priest. They are a presence that has dominated his life, overwhelming his physicality, threatening to imprison him. The physical dominance of the walls in the *mise en scène* during Frollo's songs acts as the metatext for the priest, commenting on the religious domination of his life that is evident in his voice.

As the set itself "dances" to the rhythm of the songs, so too does the chorus. Even in dance musicals like *Chicago* (1975), dance acts as narrative, progressing and commenting upon narrative events. In *les spectacles musicaux* dance performs this role, too, but also responds more immediately to the rhythms of the song, creating a rhythmic subtext. In *Notre-Dame de Paris*, from the stylised *pas de deux* of the clashes of refugee and soldier to the tumbling and break dancing at *la Fête des Fous* (The Festival of Fools), dance expresses the musical promptings, synchronised to the score, rather than the narrative. When Phoebus sings "*Déchiré*" ("Torn Apart"), his romantic desire torn between his betrothed and Esmeralda, the soldiers under his command, represented by male dancers stripped to briefs, move with contorted postures to express the strong rhythmic angst of the voice of Patrick Fiori as Phoebus. When Quasimodo liberates the refugees from prison, ropes fall from the wall and dancers abseil, twirling and leaping from their rigging. When Quasimodo sings "*Les Cloches*" ("The Bells"), huge bells descend behind him and the resonance of the song is expressed by the echo of his form, several Quasimodo's appearing, striding, and tumbling to his song, acrobats twisting like clappers from the bells swinging in rhythmic time. The overwhelming drive of the dance is to the song, chorus acting not primarily as character, but as the manifestation of rhythm through dance effecting the rhythm's signification.

Roméo & Juliette is unlike the earlier musical adaptation of Shakespeare's play, *West Side Story* (1957), in that the latter superimposes the themes and basic narrative of Shakespeare's play upon American society in the mid-twentieth century. *West Side Story* is essentially American, locked into a defined time and place. *Roméo & Juliette* creates its own particular Verona, as it exists in the musical, the metatext built on the musical's own form of song, rather than strictly on any socio-historical basis.

The choreographer, Redha, says, “*je suis arrivé avec un “West Side Story” du troisième millénaire en tête*” (“I had a *West Side Story* of the third millennium in mind”), but he did not “*excessivement moderniser*” (“excessively modernise”) the Shakespearean elements.²⁰ The choreography incorporates many forms of dance to create a style unique to the contemporary performance of the songs that enunciate *Vérone*. Nevertheless, as in *West Side Story*, dance performs a vital role in articulating the themes of division and strife that are core to the original text. *West Side Story* was choreographed and directed by Jerome Robbins and he created, Mark Steyn describes, “a movement tone appropriate to the Sharks and Jets, a heightened, stylized gangland bravado.”²¹ The ‘bravado’ also informs the figurative dance of *Roméo & Juliette*. Rheda’s role in the production encompasses both choreography and *mise en scène*, heightening the cohesion between dance and the stage environment. The stairs, levels, and backdrops of the stage architecture act to heighten the articulation of the performers. The language of dance itself involves frequent, aggressive gesturing that builds into full-blown dance, creating intensified body language. One of the musical’s original characters is *La Muette*, the mute, whose use of sign language to communicate signifies the underlying logic of the dance. In “*Les Beaux, Les Laid*” (“The Beautiful, The Ugly”), the dancers take her signed language and turn it into a mocking dance rondo. Always the essential, aggressive gestures of the performers shift between the logical and figurative, between signs and dance.

Unique also to *Roméo & Juliette* is the character *La Mort* (“Death”). *Les spectacles musicaux* have a tendency to actualise the abstract and so with death, *Roméo & Juliette*’s stage is haunted by a woman in shroud-like white who moves with a dancer’s stylised grace. The characters do not “see” her, but respond to, and describe, her “cold breath” with shivers and starts. In Roméo’s first act solo, “*J’ai Peur*” (“I’m Afraid”), she orchestrates their gestural duet, standing behind him, but not touching him, turning his movements into ballet by mimicking and extending the gestures of his singing, including the throwing back of the head with outstretched arms. The dynamic between *La Mort* and a solo-ing male character is repeated in the second act in Benvolio’s “*Comment Lui Dire*” (“How to Tell Him”), where again Benvolio is unaware of her presence, yet she creates dance by extending his gestures balletically. However, where Roméo is destined for death and the duet is on intimate terms, bodies moving in close proximity to each other, Benvolio survives and so the duet is detached and aloof, the figures often at opposite ends of the stage and only occasionally moving into close proximity. The “dance of death” that surfaces in performance exemplifies the figurative principle of extending gesture into dance.

Les spectacles musicaux, in part because they deal with well-known material, shift the balance between storytelling and a more pure distillation of performance. Pavis’s reflection on postmodernism and the performance of classical work raises

the possibility that “text and the plot are no longer at the center of the performance, nor are the space and theatrical systems (stage writing) as they were during the classical period of *mise en scène*. At the moment, time, rhythm and diction are central.”²² Postmodernism is to some extent evinced in *les spectacles musicaux*, particularly in the way in which it treats the classical text. Rhythm, in particular, becomes paramount, displacing the plot. *Roméo & Juliette* introduces the shift between classical plot and the score’s rhythms by introducing the performance with the composer’s own vision presented by the composer himself. Gérard Presgurvic recites the *ouverture*: “*Toutes les histoires, commencent pareil, rien de nouveau sous la lune, pour qu’une étoile s’éteigne, il faut qu’une autre s’allume*” (“all stories, commence the same, never anything new under the moon, for one star that goes dark, another one comes alight”). The *ouverture* acknowledges the predictability of the story: the performance consequently does not elucidate, but illuminates the classical text.

The division of families is most clearly illuminated. Timed with the opening bars of the score, following the *ouverture*, two spot lights focus on the two sets of performers: the Montagues in shades of blue, the Capulets in shades of red. As in *Notre-Dame de Paris*, costume is not period-specific, but, rather, while suggesting obliquely the historical origin of a character, indicates *couture* consistent with the French productions. *Notre-Dame de Paris* manifests, through costume designer Fred Sathal, earthy tones of *couture*, a studied, sullied, and untidy effect. The eyes of the cast are heavily painted, Egyptian-esque, describing the gypsy overtones of the songs’ guitars. It is *couture* of the street, emphatic in its symbolism of counter-culture, the *sans-papiers* wearing colourful braids and loose, tie-dyed, and splattered clothing. *Roméo & Juliette* on the other hand is nearer *haute couture*, utilising soft leathers, chiffons, and velvets. The designs are a medley of faux Medieval and Renaissance that is contemporary and luxurious. Roméo’s soft leather shirt is romantically frilled and Juliette’s wardrobe adopts the simplicity of the empire line. The mothers of the lovers are costumed as divas in flowing velvet robes and pronounced, dramatic make-up. The youths of the families themselves are dressed in leather trousers and jackets that, while evoking the gang-signification often associated with the play, are likewise highly decorative and evocative, Mercutio, the wit of the Montagues, in particular wearing a harlequin-esque jacket.

The costume designer, Dominique Borg, designed the costumes of *Roméo & Juliette* to suit specifically the performers first and foremost,²³ emphasising the unique physical characteristics of the performers over the characters they play. The aim in *les spectacles musicaux* is largely to create a performance that does not recreate the socio-historical context of the original text from which the performance is adapted, but a metatext developing its own time and rhythm, commentating upon the characters through the singers and thereby accenting the singers first and foremost.

Unlike *Notre-Dame de Paris*, *Roméo & Juliette* is not through-sung. The songs demonstrate a clearer pop syntax, the intervening scenes of dialogue, quite short, breaking up the score in lieu of recitative and musical segues and pronouncing the song introductions and exits as necessary for the more self-contained melodic structure of the pop song. Much of the intervening dialogue is concerned with the whereabouts of various characters, in particular Roméo, facilitating the movement into song by heralding the character or characters who will sing. The lead-in to “*Les Rois du Monde*” (“The Kings of the World”) features the Montaignes gathering on stage, seeking the trio of Roméo, Benvolio, and Mercutio: “*où ils sont?*” (“where are they?”). The questions cue the background architecture to slide apart, revealing the trio at the top of stairs in performance position: a contrived entrance occurring on a contrived, secondary stage. The song then finishes with the trio standing in line once more stage front, frozen in the same posture, the music and the chant of the chorus abruptly ceasing. The three then engage in brief speech as the chorus of Montaignes disperses with Benvolio and Mercutio, setting the stage for Roméo’s following solo, “*J’ai Peur.*” The abrupt cessation of aural and visual occurs again in “*Le Bal 2*” (“The Ball 2”) when Juliette discovers that Roméo, with whom she has just discovered “*l’amour heureux*” (“happy love”), is a Montaigne and thus her family’s enemy. The entire stage, on which occurs the Capulet ball, freezes on a single, extended note, Juliette reaching up towards Roméo on the catwalk, Roméo reaching down towards Juliette. As the lovers remain frozen in the gesture, the music slows and fades and the dancers in turn begin to move once more, but slowly, dance fading too as the lights on the stage dim, maintaining a spotlight on the gesture of the lovers. The business of the stage is thus dictated by the rhythm of the score, allowing narrative time to be subordinated to tempo.

The influence of film editing is apparent in the arrangement and treatment of the *mise en scène*. Presgurvic is himself a composer of film music and notes: “*Nous avons, Évelyne [Presgurvic] et moi, découpé “Roméo & Juliette” comme un film*” (“We have, Évelyne and I, cut up *Roméo & Juliette* like a film”).²⁴ Rather than the action following a linear progression, one scene dissolving into the next, the production utilises freezes, spot lights, split stages, slow motion, and sliding backdrops to transfer editorial techniques to live performance. In “*L’Amour Heureux*” (“Happy Love”), for example, as the lovers duet, they approach each other at normal speed through a throng of dancers moving in slow motion, creating visual focus on the lovers through temporal dislocation. “*Tu Dois te Marier*” (“You Must Marry”) uses a split stage, the sung performance taking place in Juliette’s bedroom on top, while below the “dumb play” of the Count Capulet and Paris occurs. The inaudible sexual rivalry between Tybalt and Paris and the sexual display of the Capulet women as they dance is placed in juxtaposition to the sexual attitudes offered in song by Juliette’s mother and nurse, the two levels commenting upon each other in defining the sexual metatext of the scene. Rather than present

a simple narrative of proposal and acceptance, the narrative is thus subordinated to the rhythm of sexual politicking in the Capulet household, the politicking itself performance, whether the performance of dance or of the musical give and take of mother and nurse: “*nous sommes de faibles femmes, dans une vallée de larmes, tu vas nous venger, tu dois te marier*” (“we are weak women, in a valley of tears, you will avenge us, you have to marry”). The scene is mirrored in the second act “*Demain*” (“Tomorrow”) in which grimmer sexual politicking takes place, the lead characters isolated in a divided set, the individual “rooms” represented by the framework lit singly, Juliette’s hand given to Paris despite her pleas and despite her secret marriage to the now exiled Roméo, her father’s voice now overriding the sexual play of the women: “*les femmes, n’ont pas le choix*” (“women haven’t a choice”).

The singers predominantly have pop voices and there is not the demarcation of vocal styles found in *Notre-Dame de Paris*, *Roméo & Juliette* presenting a greater pop continuity. The Montaigu trio, Roméo originated by Damien Sargue, Mercutio by Philippe D’Avilla, and Benvolio by Grégori Baquet, achieved chart success with the pop release of “*Les Rois du Monde*” and starred in two video clips, the other being for “*On Dit Dans la Rue*” (“The Word on the Street”), as a trio. *Notre-Dame de Paris* also made the charts, particularly with the male trio of Garou, Daniel Lavoie, and Patrick Fiori on “*Belle*” (“Beauty”). The male trio is especially significant to these *spectacles musicaux*, although the video clip of “*On Dit Dans la Rue*” sought to avoid too close an association with the boy band trend in contemporary MTV. The camera work and choreography of the video clips of “*Les Rois du Monde*” and “*On Dit Dans la Rue*” are nevertheless influenced by MTV. Yet MTV is itself influenced by the film musical: the movement between top and eye level shots, the use of splicing and fades in and out, multiple and split screens, and the patterns achieved by the dancers on the screen recalling Busby Berkeley film choreography. Altman refers to MTV and the musical as “first cousins”²⁵ and Jane Feuer argues MTV’s influence as “a new way of organizing the sound/image relationship” where “the ‘numbers’ may be structured around a non-diegetic popular song to which the characters dance or throughout which narrative segments of an episodic structure are rhythmically cut.”²⁶

Roméo & Juliette creates an MTV mirror of itself in its release of six clips: “*Aimer*” (“To Love”), directed by Thierry Vergnes, “*Les Rois du Monde*”, directed by Paul Boujenah, “*Vérone*” (Verona), directed by Philippe Gautier, “*On Dit Dans la Rue*”, directed by Redha, “*Avoir une Fille*” (“To Have a Daughter”), directed by Gilles Amado, and “*Comment Lui Dire*” (“How to Tell Him”), directed by Redha. Taken together, the clips create a montage of the musical in MTV using the same songs and performers, but with their own, independent recurring motifs and their own directors. *La Mort*, for example, is pictured as an old man in two of the clips, though in “*Les Rois du Monde*” his presence on a bridge is not remarked in the clip’s

own narrative context, but signifies the metatext, and in “*Véronique*”, he is pictured at a chessboard with the Prince, played by Frédéric Charter, quoting the symbolic tie between death and chess that is perhaps most famously evoked in Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal* (1957). The complete musical is maintained as the metatext, an external commentary, for each individual clip, but with different metaphorical and thematic concerns. In “*Aimer*,” the title *Roméo & Juliette* is flashed across the screen as the two lovers meet: contemporary tourists at “Juliette’s balcony.” The clip then cuts between the dreaming pair, Roméo lying in sheets of Montaigne blue, Juliette, originated by Cécilia Cara, in those of Capulet red. The lovers meet in their dreams floating in a *mise en scène* created by digital technology and here too gather the other protagonists, forming a circle below the levitating lovers as they chant: “*aimer, c’est ce qu’y a d’plus beau*” (“to love, that’s most beautiful”). The juxtaposition structures a ritualised movement out of real time: not the classic dream world, but a digitalised dream world.

“*Les Rois du Monde*,” however, is evidently Parisian. The Eiffel Tower features in the imagery, and the male trio are filmed crossing the Seine. The narrative context of the song is evoked with the presence of Juliette as the trio cross the bridge, reappearing on a balcony as Roméo hands her a charm in the shape of the musical’s logo, a fiery heart. Tybalt likewise appears on the bridge, the animosity of his confrontation of the trio unexplained in the immediate narrative of the clip. The confrontation is off-set by the spliced and split screen visuals of the trio among the dancers: “*nous on fait l’amour on vit la vie*” (“we make love, live life”). Paris itself serves as a visual allegory of the song’s attitude to life and romance.

“*Véronique*” gives the musical’s narrative far greater prominence in the clip’s *mise en scène*, being the song, performed by the Prince, that in the theatrical production serves to introduce *Véronique*. The clip exhibits the production’s strong *couture* statements in velvets and crinkled satins. The imagery utilises the metaphor of the chess game to describe the movement of the protagonists, challenging each other across the floors of a Baroque mansion, playing out the narrative in scenic segments cut to the song’s rhythm: Juliette rejecting Paris, Juliette marrying Roméo, Tybalt killing Mercutio, Juliette taking poison, Juliette killing herself on finding Roméo dead. The end of the clip shows the procession of protagonists and their dead moving out of screen. “*On Dit Dans la Rue*” shifts the narrative again, away from the production’s aesthetic values. The clip unfolds a carnal reading of the Montaigne trio, depicted in seedy night clubs and on the streets with motorbikes, fighting against wire fences. The *mise en scène* is contemporary, decayed, the footage of the trio undercut with images of Juliette presented in a sexual embrace with Roméo, in contrast to the previous presentation of the heroine as aloof and chaste. The narrative themes of self-destruction are expounded, intensifying the disparity between the Shakespearean origins and the contemporary social context of love and violence.

"*Avoir une Fille*" is directed by Gilles Amado, who likewise directs the video of the live production, utilising freeze frames and other cinematic techniques to further accentuate the theatrical equivalents. The song, Comte Capulet's lament on fatherhood, features Sébastien Chato artificially aged and seated in a digitalised room, itself recalling the dream world evoked in "*Aimer*." He grows younger with the song's cadences, the text removed from normal temporal sequence: he gets younger, not older, his immediate, digitalised environment removed from any given reality of historical or narrative context, the digital 'ghosts' of the stage performance fading in and out to his song. The final clip released to date is "*Comment Lui Dire*", Benvolio's lament on being the messenger of Juliette's death. Where on stage Benvolio performs the lament and the journey from *Vérone* on a stage empty but for the presence of *La Mort*, in the clip, the rigours of the journey are choreographed, the sense of inclement landscapes and physical hardship suggested by the clip's *mise en scène* acting as metatext for the bitterness of the song itself. In contemporary dress, Benvolio sings on dusty roads, military-type trucks passing him, wreathing him in dirt, before he dives into the Mediterranean, the song concluding in a symbolic drowning: "*comment lui dire qu'il va souffrir, comment lui dire*" ("how to tell him that he'll suffer, how to tell him").

Les spectacles musicaux transfer well into multimedia and both *Notre-Dame de Paris* and *Roméo & Juliette* were, as well as being released on concept recordings and live recordings, released as DVDs within the lives of their performance on stage.²⁷ The DVDs are live recordings, but utilise cinematic technology to re-emphasise many of the stage techniques through freeze frames and superimposed images, for the stage techniques themselves borrow from cinematic and MTV language. The relatively rapid movement into DVD itself goes to *le spectacle musical's* roots in the recording industry. The productions, beginning as CDs and hit singles, present a relatively painless transition into multimedia that eludes other theatrical productions. *Les spectacles musicaux* thus create a useful and valuable dialogue between the traditions of theatre and the contemporary media age, reconfiguring performance around the central and transferable form of the song.

Les spectacles musicaux offer up theatrical performance that is unprescribed by dramatic traditions, enriched by a musical heritage exploring the storytelling potential of the voice raised in song. The ability of the musicals to furthermore achieve popular success through current multimedia avenues and less conventional theatrical stages indicates the great potential of the genre as one that can bridge theatre and popular audiences and one that can re-examine and elaborate on the performance of song in its contemporary forms, rather than in its adaptation to dramatic context. The spectacle thus created is less about artifice and display, than about visualising a new *mise en scène* for sound and the illumination of historic material through metatext.

Notes

¹ In the article, *les spectacles musicaux* is used as the plural form of *le spectacle musical*. Note: Quotes are freely translated from the French by the author.

² Richard Kislán, *The Musical: A Look at the American Musical Theatre* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980) 255.

³ Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright, *Changing Stages: A View of British Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000) 345.

⁴ Discrepancies in theatre capacities, bookings, and seasons make detailed comparison between the two productions impractical.

⁵ Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London: Routledge, 1990) 137.

⁶ The production moved to the West End's Palace Theatre in December.

⁷ Martin Sutton, "Patterns of Meaning in the Musical," *Genre: The Musical: A Reader*, ed. Rick Altman (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul in association with British Film Institute, 1981) 191.

⁸ Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 71.

⁹ Altman.

¹⁰ Altman.

¹¹ Patrice Pavis, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*, trans. Loren Kruger (London: Routledge, 1992) 32.

¹² 31.

¹³ 30.

¹⁴ 37.

¹⁵ Altman, *American Film Musical* 70.

¹⁶ Altman.

¹⁷ Luck Mervil, *Luck Mervil* (Canada: Coeur de Lion, Musicor, 2000).

¹⁸ Luc Plamondon and Richard Cocciante, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (France: Pomme Music, Sony, 1997).

¹⁹ French Canadian pop diva, Céline Dion, has in fact covered Esmeralda's "*Vivre*," in English "Live For the One I Love" (lyrics by Will Jennings) as included on the English release of the musical (France: Enzo Music Limited & Pomme Music, Sony, 2000).

²⁰ In Bobby Smart (Textes, Roméo & Juliette, Programme, *nouvelle* edition (Metz, 2000).

²¹ Mark Steyn, *Broadway Babies Say Goodnight: Musicals Then and Now* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997) 180.

²² Patrice Pavis, *Theatre at the Crossroads* 61-62.

²³ In Bobby Smart (Textes).

²⁴ In Bobby Smart (Textes).

²⁵ Altman, *American Film Musical* 363.

²⁶ Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993) 132.

²⁷ Luc Plamondon and Richard Cocciante, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (France: Pomme Music, Sony, 1999). Gérard Presgurvic, *Roméo & Juliette* (France: GLEM, Universal, KGD, TF1 Video 2001).