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Sunset Boulevard
Music by Andrew Lloyd Webber
Book and Lyrics by Don Black and Christopher Hampton
Based on the film by Billy Wilder
Directed by Chris Coleman

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The Guide
A Theatergoer’s Resource
Act 1 — In 1949 Hollywood, down-on-his-luck screenwriter Joe Gillis tries to hustle up some work at Paramount Studios. He meets with a producer who shoots down his proposed script as well as a request for a loan to bring his car payments up to date. He does, however, meet Betty Schaefer, a pretty, young script editor who proposes they work together to develop one of his earlier projects. As they chat, Joe is spotted by car repossessors and makes a quick escape.

During the car chase that ensues down Sunset Boulevard, Joe evades his pursuers by pulling into the garage of a dilapidated mansion. Beckoned inside the house, Joe encounters Norma Desmond, the “greatest star of all” from the silent film era who never made the transition to sound movies. Taken aback, Joe comments, “You used to be in pictures—you used to be big,” to which she retorts, “I am big… it’s the pictures that got small!”

The huge, gloomy estate is inhabited only by Norma and Max, her loyal butler and chauffeur. Although several decades past her prime and mostly forgotten by once-fans, Norma is convinced she is as beautiful and popular as ever. She informs Joe of her intention returning to his hometown in Ohio. He also bluntly tells Betty he likes being Norma’s pet and tells Betty he likes being Norma’s pet.

Act 2 — Someone from Paramount phones the mansion with a cryptic request. Certain DeMille is eager to shoot her script; Norma drops in on the set of his current film. She is greeted warmly by former colleagues and the director himself, but DeMille remains noncommittal about Salome. Meanwhile, Max discovers it’s Norma’s exotic car the studio wants for an upcoming movie, not her. However, the delusional Norma leaves the lot convinced she’ll be back in front of the cameras in short order.

Norma eventually deduces that Joe and Betty are lovers. She calls the younger woman to confront her, only to have Betty reply that she is being Norma’s pet and that she should go back to Artie. After Betty departs, brokenhearted, Joe tells Norma he’s leaving her and tells her that she should go back to Artie. After Betty departs, brokenhearted, Joe tells Norma he’s leaving her and tells her that she should go back to Artie. After Betty departs, brokenhearted, Joe tells Norma he’s leaving her and tells her that she should go back to Artie. After Betty departs, brokenhearted, Joe tells Norma he’s leaving her and tells her that she should go back to Artie.

Completely fallen into insanity, Norma mistakes the police who soon arrive for studio personnel and her beloved fans. Thinking she is on the set of Salome, Norma slowly descends her grand staircase and speaks the immortal phrase, “And now, Mr. DeMille, I am ready for my close-up.”

In 2004 he produced a film version of The Phantom of the Opera directed by Joel Schumacher and, in 2006, a unique spectacular version of the show in Las Vegas. His new musical Love Never Dies, which continues the story of The Phantom and Christine, opened at London’s Adelphi Theatre in March this year.

He pioneered television casting for musical theatre with the Emmy award-winning BBC series How Do You Solve A Problem Like Maria? He repeated his success with Any Dream Will Do which cast the title role of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat and in 2008 he cast the musical Oliver! for the BBC. This year in the BBC series Over The Rainbow he is searching for a Dorothy and Toto for a new theatrical production of The Wizard of Oz.

His awards include seven Tonys, three Grammys including Best Contemporary Classical Composition for Requiem, seven Oliviers, a Golden Globe, an Oscar, two International Emmys, the Premiun Imperiale, the Richard Rodgers Award for Excellence in Musical Theatre and The Kennedy Center Honor.

He currently owns seven London theatres including the Adelphi Theatre in March this year. He has just completed a musical version of The Count of Monte Cristo with French composer Michel Legrand which is scheduled to open in London later this year.

Andrew Lloyd Webber is the composer of The Likes of Us, Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, Jesus Christ Superstar, By Jeeves, Evita, Variations and Tell Me On A Sunday later combined as Song & Dance, Cats, Starlight Express, The Phantom of the Opera, Aspects of Love, Sunset Boulevard, Whistle Down the Wind, The Beautiful Game, The Woman in White, and Love Never Dies. He composed the film scores of Gainsbouh and The Odessa File, and a setting of the Latin Requiem Mass Requiem.

Synopsis

WARNING — This synopsis includes major plot points that could potentially detract from your viewing experience. Read at your own discretion.

About the Artists

Andrew Lloyd Webber is the composer of The Likes of Us, Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, Jesus Christ Superstar, By Jeeves, Evita, Variations and Tell Me On A Sunday later combined as Song & Dance, Cats, Starlight Express, The Phantom of the Opera, Aspects of Love, Sunset Boulevard, Whistle Down the Wind, The Beautiful Game, The Woman in White, and Love Never Dies. He composed the film scores of Gainsbouh and The Odessa File, and a setting of the Latin Requiem Mass Requiem.

In a career that has won him many glittering prizes (an Oscar for his song “Born Free”, five Academy Award nominations, two Tony Awards plus three Tony nominations, Five Ivor Novello Awards, a Golden Globe and many platinum, gold and silver discs) he has worked with some of the world’s leading composers. Julie Styne, Henry Mancini, Quincy Jones, Elmer Bernstein, Marvin Hamlisch, Charles Aznavour, etc.

He is currently working on a musical to be produced in Shanghai and is also re-working the musical of Bar Mitzvah Boy, a musical he wrote with Jule Styne. He has just completed a musical version of The Count of Monte Cristo with French composer Michel Legrand which is scheduled to open in London later this year.

Christopher Hampton is a playwright, screenwriter, director and producer. Born in 1946 in Portugal, he spent his childhood in Aden, Egypt and Zanzibar, then studied as a postgraduate in Oxford University. He was the youngest writer ever to have a play staged in the West End, and in the late 1960s established a musical collaboration with the Emmy award-winning BBC series Over The Rainbow.

He has written many screenplays, including the play adaptation of the BBC series Aspects of Love. He also wrote lyrics with some of the world’s leading composers: Jule Styne, Charles Aznavour, etc.

Don Black started out as a standup comedian and became himself entirely for the death of Variety. He made his West End debut as a theatre lyricist with composer John Barry on the musical Billy, starring Michael Crawford at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London.

Don received two Broadway Tony Awards for best book and lyrics of a musical for his work on Sunset Boulevard. This marked his third theatrical collaboration with Andrew Lloyd Webber. They first joined forces to write the song cycle Tell Me On A Sunday, which was developed to form the basis of the stage show Song and Dance. They were reunited for Arts of Love. Don has also added songs to Andrew’s stage shows Starlight Express and Whistle Down The Wind. He also wrote lyrics for the Andrew Lloyd Webber produced musical Bombay Dreams.

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His own stage plays include When Did You Last See My Mother, performed at The Royal Court Theatre, Total Eclipse about the relationship between Rimbaud and Verlaine; the comedy The Philanthropist, Savages and Treats.

In 1985 he wrote the play Les Liaisons Dangereuses, adapted and translated from the novel by Choderlos de Laclos, and later adapted as a film. The resulting film, Dangerous Liaisons, was an international success and won many awards. He also wrote and directed Carrington, about the relationship of Lytton Strachey with the painter, Dora Carrington.

Other work includes translations of Yasmina Reza’s work for the stage, and further versions of Chekhov and Odon von Horvath. He was the stage adaptation and co-wrote the lyrics for Andrew Lloyd Webber’s Sunset Boulevard, and the recent screenplay for the BAFTA nominated film, Atonement.
Andrew Lloyd Webber’s Program Notes from the Original London Production of Sunset Boulevard

I first saw Sunset Boulevard sometime in the early 70s. It inspired a tune. This tune was supposed to be the title song. However, I neither had the rights to the film, nor at that time was likely to be able to obtain them. Eventually I used a couple of fragments of that tune in Stephen Frears’ affectionate Bogart spoof, Gumshoe.

Hal Prince began working with me on the musical Evita. We discussed Sunset Boulevard and I saw the movie again since Hal Prince had obtained the rights. It all came to nothing but I wrote an idea for the moment when Norma Desmond returns to Paramount Studios.

At around the same time I met with Christopher Hampton whom I had known for some years as he was at school with Tim Rice. He had already declared an interest in writing the libretto for the English National Opera of Sunset Boulevard, but this too had come to nothing. We thought it was a wonderful idea but came to the conclusion that in both our cases other projects made Sunset impossible and there was yet again the question of whether we would get the rights.

I thought of Sunset on and off over the next 12 years, but it was only after Aspects of Love that I felt it was the subject I had to compose next. I contacted Paramount and, this time, the rights were available. So I took an option and started work. As ever, several early jottings were discarded. Then I had the idea of working with Chris Hampton once more. Chris was intrigued but felt that he would be happy working with somebody who had experience of lyrics before. I introduced him to my old friend and collaborator, Don Black, and what I hoped most would happen appears to have done so. They collaborated on both the book and lyrics together.

I began composing the score shortly after the opening of Aspects of Love in London in 1989. I tried various versions of the title song, but came back to the original idea I had in the early 70s, albeit in a very different style and form. I stayed with my late 70s draft of the moment where Norma returns to Paramount, “As If We Never Said Goodbye”. Otherwise mostly everything has been written since 1989.

—Andrew Lloyd Webber

6 Forgotten Silent Film Actresses

Virginia Bradford (1900-1992)
She enjoyed a brief Hollywood career in the mid 1920s. She played mostly supporting roles.

Norma Talmadge (1895-1957)
She was one of the greatest stars of the silent era and a major box office draw. She was also involved in film productions with the Norma Talmadge Film Corporation. Her voice did not lend well to talking pictures and after a couple of disappointing films retired.

Pola Negri (1894-1987)
She was a polish actress who made films portraying herself as a Vamp. Her career began in German films, but in the early 1920s moved to Hollywood. With the introduction of talking pictures her Vamp style fell out of vogue and Her accented voice did not appeal to the film goers of the time.

Theda Bara (1885-1955)
She was another who portrayed the Vamp in her pictures. She was one of the most famous movie stars, ranking behind only Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford in popularity. After her marriage to film director Charles Brabin, her career slowed until she finally retired in 1926.

Louise Brooks (1906-1985)
She appeared towards the end of the Silent era playing the lead female roles in a number of light comedies and flapper films. In the late 1920s she left Hollywood for Germany making films that were classified as “very adult” and considered shocking. When she returned to Hollywood she was effectively blacklisted.

Colleen Moore (1900-1988)
She was one of the most fashionable of the Hollywood stars. Moore playing a vivacious flapper caused a sensation making her one of the most talked about actresses of her day. Her roles were mostly light comedy. Her roles in talking pictures were in films that weren’t very successful and retired in 1934. She perhaps now is more known for a doll house she worked on from 1928 until her death, presently at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago or her book on the stock market published in 1969.
From Silent Films to Talkies

By Wendy Ide

In 1926, Jack Warner, then head of Warner Bros studio, declared that talking films would never be a commercial success. Silent films, he argued, had an international appeal, a visual language that transcended the spoken word. They allowed the audience to invest their own meanings, imagine their own dialogue. No, the talkies would never take off. Within just a couple of years, Warner would be demonstrated to be dramatically, fundamentally wrong in his assessment. Which just goes to add weight to William Goldman’s oft-quote film industry aphorism, ‘Nobody Knows Anything’.

The first talkie – that is to say the first film with dialogue on its soundtrack – was The Jazz Singer, in 1927. But the Al Jolson vehicle wasn’t, in fact, the first feature to be issued with a soundtrack. That honour goes to Don Juan (1926), a rather fruity film in which innocent maidens were beset by debauched men intent on ravishing them. The soundtrack was recorded on long-playing records, each the same length as a reel of film. Recorded on the discs was a score by the New York Philharmonic, some faint thumps, bell-ringing and the indistinct clashing of swords.

What made The Jazz Singer such a sensation was the fact that audiences could hear Jolson’s voice. Actually rather a poor film, with a thin story and a performance style was almost as important a component in the film’s success as the fact that audiences could hear. What made the talkies such a sensation was the fact that audiences could hear Jolson’s voice – a broad Jewish Brooklyn drawl – with her sweet silent screen persona. Likewise Vilma Banky’s career was killed because of her thick Hungarian accent. It is often said that Clara Bow’s problems reconciling her voice – a broad Jewish Brooklyn drawl – with her sweet silent screen persona. Likewise Vilma Banky’s career was killed because of her thick Hungarian accent. It is often said that Clara Bow’s problems reconciling her voice – a broad Jewish Brooklyn drawl – with her sweet silent screen persona are the cause of her marriage to Josef von Sternberg. Whereas in The Jazz Singer, Jolson’s voice, a broad Jewish Brooklyn drawl, is important to the film’s success because it is authentic to his character.

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What made The Jazz Singer such a sensation was the fact that, in addition to the songs on the soundtrack, there were a couple of spoken ad-libs from Jolson: “Wait a minute, you ain’t heard nothing yet” being the most famous. The audience went wild for the film, and specifically for Jolson himself, whose electric performance style was almost as important a component in the film’s success as the fact that audiences could hear his voice. Actually rather a poor film, with a thin story and mawkish sentiments, it was the novelty, and force of personality, that earned the The Jazz Singer over $3.5 million at the box office. Jolson’s follow up took even more—he was the first artist whose career was launched to a new level by the advent of sound.

To say that the talkies revolutionised cinema would be an understatement. The ramifications impacted on the business side of the industry, the technical side and the artistic side. Sound cinema famously ended some careers and kick-started others. The irony is that, despite the fact that audiences seemingly couldn’t get enough of the new innovation, the early talkies are generally considered to be very poor, particularly compared to the heights of artistic merit reached in silent cinema during the late 1920s.

Uncertain as to what to do with sound technology, Hollywood initially played it safe and, to all intents and purposes, simply transposed existing musical stage shows to the screen. Acting was exaggerated, denunciation extremely laboured in order to be recorded by the rudimentary microphone systems. Stories were filled with dialogue just because they could be. Films of this period made little mark on the history of cinema as an art form, they were all about making money.

The demise of the silent film was far more rapid than anyone could have predicted: the last mainstream silent movie was Points West, released by Universal in the late summer of 1929. Even so, it took a couple of years for the studios to fully commit themselves to recorded dialogue – considered by some to be a passing fad – rather than just recorded music. In 1929, Fox released ‘the first outdoor all-talkie’, In Old Arizona, for which cameras were hidden in bushes.

The early days of sound were dogged by numerous technical problems. The cameras used at the time were huge and extremely loud. In order for the noise not to be picked up by the microphones, the cameras were isolated in glass cabinets, severely restricting the already limited range of movement achievable with these behemoths. Actors too found their movements limited as, until the invention of the boom mic a few years later, they had to stay within close range of a static microphone. Some actors fared better with the new technology than others. Silent movie queen Norma Talmadge made two talkies but quit film altogether because audiences had problems reconciling her voice – a broad Jewish Brooklyn drawl – with her sweet silent screen persona. Likewise Vilma Banky’s career was killed because of her thick Hungarian accent. It is often said that Clara Bow’s problems reconciling her voice – a broad Jewish Brooklyn drawl – with her sweet silent screen persona are the cause of her marriage to Josef von Sternberg. Whereas in The Jazz Singer, Jolson’s voice, a broad Jewish Brooklyn drawl, is important to the film’s success because it is authentic to his character.

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