

THE MUSIC OF ANDREW LLOYD WEBBER

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

Dressed in faded jeans and t-shirts, seven guys gathered around an upright piano in the basement of Carpenter Hall looking more prepared for a pick-up football game than an evening of song and dance. Glancing from sheet music to the elegant hands of a decidedly British director, sweater tied neatly around his shoulders, they wait for his cue before breaking into perfect-pitch harmony. Bringing conviction to every word of the Andrew Lloyd Webber composition, “No Matter What,” they seemed to speak for the entire cast and crew, who had exactly 19 days to prepare for the biggest opening night of their lives.



Their personas ranging from phantoms to felines, OU's fine arts students turned a grand experiment into an unqualified, smashing success.

When Andrew Lloyd Webber prepares to launch a new theatrical event, he calls upon legions of professional singers, dancers and musicians, as well as his personal entertainment company, the Really Useful Group, to coordinate theatre and concert production in major markets around the world. The distance between London's Royal Albert Hall and Norman's Catlett Music Center closed significantly in April, however, when the University of Oklahoma debuted a world premier Lloyd Webber production, relying solely on the talent of 350 students and the passion of four director/producers to pull it off.

Bringing *The Music of Andrew Lloyd Webber* to OU was a coup orchestrated by A. Max Weitzenhoffer, a Tony-award winning producer and himself an OU drama alumnus. His personal and professional relationship with the mega-hit composer offered students a leg-up into a world usually reserved for the likes of Sarah Brighton and Michael Crawford.

For years Weitzenhoffer, who helped establish the musical theatre program at OU in 1995, had been looking for a way to pull students from each of the fine arts schools into a united project that would challenge and change them in the best of ways. Educating the best performing arts students requires two things, he says: finding the performers' comfort zone and taking them out of it. *continued*



Rich Taylor

Musical theatre senior Skyler Adams performs the title song from *Sunset Boulevard*.

While visiting Lord Andrew's country estate, Weitzenhoffer discussed the idea with a longtime Lloyd Webber director and collaborator. Hugh Wooldridge suggested a concert production he had conceived and directed since 1989.

The Music of Andrew Lloyd Webber is an ambitious undertaking—featuring a full orchestra, combined choirs, children's choir, dancers and vocal soloists performing classics from four decades of material. Lloyd Webber was so particular about the quality of the performances that he never had granted production rights to any non-professional company. Until now.

Both Wooldridge and Weitzenhoffer had years of bankable credibility with Lloyd Webber. Weitzenhoffer had co-produced his musical *Song and Dance*, starring Bernadette Peters, in New York, and later produced *Aspects of Love*. Wooldridge had directed the first performance of *Cats* at the summer Sydmonon Festival. Based on their reputation for excellence, permission was granted to OU. In another stroke of good fortune, Wooldridge himself signed on as director.

"To get professionals of Hugh's caliber to come to our campus and spend time working with our students when they are in the middle of their own projects is phenomenal," says Rich Taylor, dean of the Weitzenhoffer Family College of Fine Arts. At the time, Wooldridge was preparing for *ANTHEMS. The Concert* at the Royal Albert Hall. The star-studded benefit featured Kerry Ellis—*Wicked's* Elphaba—and Brian May of the rock band Queen.

"Max is always encouraging us to have direct links to people in the profession," Taylor adds. "It is his great gift that he brings to us as an international theatre producer—and also a great challenge."

From the onset, the production schedule and demands on performers were daunting. Music, choreography and costumes from *Cats*, *Evita*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Whistle Down the Wind*, *Starlight Express*,



Sandra Bent

Senior Kayley McCoy captivated the audience with her moving portrayal of Evita Peron in the Andrew Lloyd Webber classic, "Don't Cry for Me Argentina."

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and *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* had to be ready in three weeks.

"We have 20 days of rehearsal—not full days, mind you—just four hours in the evenings," says Wooldridge in a pre-performance interview. "So really we have 10 days. With 300 kids. And that's after a full day of classes and activities. My job is to motivate them and make them excited about what they are doing. It can't be all sackcloth and ashes."

Elvie Ellis, an Oklahoma City vocal music education sophomore, had twice the reasons to be nervous. This would be his OU debut and under the direction of a professional with international credentials.

"When we started, we didn't know what to expect. I mean he's a 'Big Time Guy' so we were all on edge," admits Ellis. "He expects a lot of us, but on the flipside, he is really funny. He cracks jokes all the time.

"He has also taught me not to doubt myself. He tells us, if you have an idea, do it full out. It might not work, but do it full out. Make a *big* mistake."

For OU musical theatre performance junior Sophie Menas, who has appeared in leading roles in OU productions from *Rent* to *A Chorus Line*, working with Wooldridge was an eye-opening experience.

"The first rehearsal, he set up rules, one through nine. One being no talking; two, don't ever be late. If you just do those two, you'll be all right," says Menas. "He was adamant about getting respect, but you also get the feeling he really cares about us.

"Hugh keeps saying, 'We're a company,' and that's how we feel. We're all in this together. We have created a community. We are proud of each other, not competing against each other. It's all about working together."

The task of coordinating each of the musical components



Wendy Mutz

Sandra Bent



Wendy Mutz

TOP: Performers of musical theatre must be triple threats—equally adept at acting, singing and dancing, as evidenced in the boisterous finale, “There’s a Light at the End of the Tunnel.” ABOVE: Choreography by OU dance professor Steve Brule packed some heat during the spicy “Buenos Aires” featuring, from left, Zachary Leighton, Sophie Menas and Brett Young. LEFT: Students from the OU School of Dance, from left, Nathan Young, Alyssa Grimsley, Jammie Walker and Catherine Chastain, contributed significantly to the world premiere of “Love Changes Everything.”

was given to School of Music professor Richard Zielinski, who served as both musical director and orchestra conductor for the show. A former college football player who still bounds more than walks across campus, the inimitable Dr. Z was recruited to revitalize OU's choral music program. In less than two years, he has restructured and resuscitated no less than four performing choral groups from near-extinction.

"For our students in the arts, this is an experiment in real time," says Zielinski. "They have to learn this music, and it's a phenomenal body of work—arias to classical requiem to rock 'n' roll. It's like dancing on the edge—which I love.

"It's an exciting place to be because people reach their potential quicker under pressure. I know they can do it. All it takes is for someone to say, 'You're perfect for this role, but you've got to know it by next weekend.' They are all capable, but without that push, they might not do it."

For Taylor, the former vice president of live entertainment for Disney Inc., the controlled chaos had a familiar feel. "The level of people I've worked with professionally are like Hugh—skilled, gifted, demanding and able to make magic in a hurry."

In November, Wooldridge first visited Norman for auditions, where he says he found some "delightful surprises."

"The facility was fantastic. The students were fantastic," he says. "I was thrilled with how good the freshmen were because it means of all the places in the world that these students could go to train, they have chosen to come here. Why have they come? Because this place has a wonderful reputation. And that's a real compliment to Rich Taylor, Greg Kunesh, Mary Margaret Holt and all the faculty and staff. The word has gotten out."

Wooldridge returned mid-March with 30 works from Lloyd Webber's 400-song repertoire, chosen specifically for the OU production. Included in the program would be the United States premiere of the title song from *Love Never Dies*, the long-awaited sequel to *The Phantom of the Opera*. It was now up to a cast and crew of mainly 18- to 22-year-olds, who were anxious to prove they were ready for the big leagues.

"If we did this same production professionally, paying for rehearsal rooms, paying for the talent, crew, marketing, it would cost around half a million dollars for one performance," notes Wooldridge. Before the choirs, soloists and orchestra even had a chance to rehearse together, all four performances had sold out.

"We are hitting it hard," says Wooldridge. "The first week we are doing all the company numbers. The second week we do solos. The third week we put them all together. And we do dance along the way. It is like a chef adding ingredients. We put



Kasey Allee Foreman

Sophomore Damien Chambers, center, electrified the house with his full-tilt portrayal of Judas from *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Backing Chambers are vocal soloists, from left, Emily Luhrs, Kate Dinsmore, Kristina Love, Hannah Lane, Adrianna Hicks and Sophie Menas.



Rich Taylor

London musical theatre director Hugh Wooldridge had less than three weeks to rehearse 30 numbers with an all-student cast. Wooldridge declared the students "fantastic," exceeding his expectations.



Producing, directing and endorsing an Andrew Lloyd Webber production of this magnitude required the combined skill sets of administrators, directors and producers from the OU campus to London's West End. The men who made it happen are, from left, Richard Zielinski, music director; Rich Taylor, producer; Max Weitzenhoffer, executive producer; Hugh Wooldridge, writer and director; and OU President David Boren.

them all into the pot, and we just pray to God someone likes the sauce."

Based on the reaction to the show night after night, Wooldridge turned in a culinary masterpiece. From the electrifying guitar intro to *Jesus Christ Superstar* to hidden gems like the aria "Chanson D'Enfance" from *Aspects of Love*, the audience was entranced.

Skyler Adams, a musical theatre performance senior, nailed the jaded gigolo of *Sunset Boulevard*, while Kayley McCoy held the audience assuredly in her white-gloved hands through "Don't Cry for Me Argentina." Just two weeks before, she had stood before Wooldridge in capri jeans and sneakers, eyes locked into his for approval while she sang the number for the first time before the assembled cast. When the final perfect note faded, the rehearsal erupted into applause and cheers from dancers, musicians and singers alike.

"We have gained a new respect for all the other disciplines in the college," says Ellis. "Vocal music education majors like me live inside of Catlett, and musical theatre majors live in Carpenter and the dancers live in Reynolds. Being in this production, we all learned to appreciate each other and what we do. We have definitely grown as a cast."

This is what Taylor had hoped for when they began "the experiment."

"I'm all about our schools crossing boundaries and working together," he says. "That's real-world experience. The plan is to do one of these large-scale productions every three to four years. Our students deserve the chance to stretch out and that includes all of us—designers, choreographers, faculty and staff—taking risks. It teaches them they can do it, too. If you never take risks, you will never know how good you can be."

The production cut no corners. Special theatrical lighting was installed in Catlett's Paul F. Sharp Concert Hall and one of Lloyd

Webber's own sound designers, Lucas "Rico" Corrubia, arrived from New York to ensure the big sound synonymous with the composer's music. Dancers in metallic bodysuits roller-skated fluidly through *Starlight Express*, while the athletic choreography of *The Boys in the Photograph* proved a skillful combination of Riverdance and Fight Club.

Cats and *The Phantom of the Opera* were solid crowd pleasers as the show built toward its frenzied climax with "There's a Light at the End of the Tunnel," a no-holds-barred, gospel-tent anthem that raised the pointed peaks of Catlett into the heavens. The tireless performers, who left the stage as students preparing for finals, received enthusiastic standing ovations night after night.

"Our job and our duty is to demonstrate the talent of the young people we are working with and to give them experience when they go to an audition," says Wooldridge. "In this case, they also can write on their CVs that they took part in a world premiere of an Andrew Lloyd Webber production that was written especially for them."

Menas says she will carry the lessons learned from Wooldridge into her professional career. "The excellence he demands made us successful. It taught me that what you originally think is enough is never enough. It has been the best experience I could have."

Weitzenhoffer, who backed the show from its inception, never doubted the talent and the drive of the OU students. "The caliber of students continues to rise along with the reputation of OU's School of Musical Theatre," he says. "It would be very fortunate for the school and the students to always have someone of Hugh's caliber in residence."

The College of Fine Arts' bold experiment proved one significant truth beyond dispute. When asked to deliver their best, these kids will be ready. No matter what.

Lynette Lobban is associate editor of *Sooner Magazine*.