

Honk ! : Stiles, Drewe and a Duck called "Ugly"

Not many writing collaborations can claim to begin over a photocopier, but that is where George Stiles and Anthony Drewe met and where a close friendship was formed. Both were students at Exeter University (probably the Best University in the World) in the 1980s. Although they had not met, they both knew of each other (in the sense of being rivals for the theatrical talent at the University): George was the musical director of the Gilbert & Sullivan Society whilst Anthony set up a group to perform his brother's musicals.

A trip to see Sondheim's Sweeney Todd might dissuade most people from attempting to write a musical, but in the case of Stiles & Drewe, (pretty much like bees who don't realise they can't actually fly), they just decided to get on and do it. The resulting show was Tutankhamun and it was all done in the wrong order. Before a word or note was written, the theatre was booked and their places at Teacher Training college put on hold (there's probably nothing like the threat of an empty theatre and no career to stimulate the writing of a musical) but, hey, they were only 21 and nothing ever goes wrong when you are that age.

Stiles & Drewe describe this first effort as "a bit pants". Be that as it may, it proved the springboard to their big break with Just So, based on some of the Kipling stories of the same name. Encouraged by Stuart Trotter of the Northcott Theatre (set on the Exeter University campus atop the fondly-named Cardiac Hill...due to the symptoms experienced by students living in the Halls of Residences at the bottom making their way to the top) to enter the musical in the new Vivienne Ellis competition, the new show came to the attention of Cameron Mackintosh, Julia McKenzie, Stephen Sondheim and Steven Spielberg. (Yes – is all true: it's on the Internet, so it must be.) With such a dubious collection of hangers-on, it is hardly surprising that the excitement of teaching was lost to George and Anthony and, instead the comparative security of show business beckoned.

And so, missing out an appearance on New Faces and the musical Peter Pan, we arrive in 1993 and Honk!. the show was first produced at the Windmill Theatre in 1993 and, according to the writers, went through a comparatively easy gestation; the book being written in a few days and the songs over about six months. Ironical then, that this is still Stiles & Drewe's most successful musical collaboration to date. But its journey didn't end there: the big leap came when one of their new best friends, Julia McKenzie, took the show to the Royal National Theatre for the Christmas run of 1999-2000 and winning the 2000 Olivier Award for Best Musical in the process.

According to the Telegraph review at the time, Stiles & Drewe have taken the "surprisingly dull" original Hans Anderson story and given it "both sparky street cred and a likeable message urging tolerance of other people's differences". The Independent said of the National production that it successfully "pulls off the considerable trick of delighting children and winking wickedly at adults simultaneously, without ever resorting to double standards".

Whether you have come to the Harlequin today of an age to be delighted or winked at is, of course, entirely up to you.

Terry Foster
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