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Marvin Carlson notes that 'physical locations, like individual human beings, can by the operations of fame be so deeply implanted in the consciousness of a culture that individuals in that culture, actually encountering them for the first time, inevitably find that experience already haunted by the cultural construction of these persons and places'.[1] Examine the influence of celebrity and site of performance upon at least two West End productions, in response to this quotation.

Georgina Palmiero

In this quotation, Marvin Carlson discusses the haunting of the theatre and production by the 'cultural construction' of places and people. Here, and throughout *The Haunted Stage*, Carlson argues that an individual's first experience of a production is inevitably influenced by memories and nontheatrical familiarities. In line with Carlson, I will argue that an audience's reception of a production is directly affected by the preconceptions formed through the 'cultural construction' of celebrity and site of performance.

I will exemplify the nature of this influence by examining two West End productions, *Les Misérables*[2] and *Matilda the Musical*,[3] which were produced in collaboration with the Royal Shakespeare Company, and continue to run in the West End today. This study will reveal the 'operations of fame' in relation to the cultural prominence of the West End as a theatre location, and its impact upon a production's reputation and audience reception. I will also consider the ways in which the 'fame' of 'individual human beings' can affect the reputation and experience of a production. Rather than the celebrity of performers, I will focus upon names that are intrinsically associated with the identity of these productions, and the potential pre-conceptions that are formed by the spectator as a result of their 'cultural construction'.

Carlson writes that 'physical locations' are 'implanted in the consciousness of a culture', asserting that the perception of a particular culture is fundamentally involved in the identity of a location. Elsewhere, he notes that it is these spaces and places to which audiences bring an 'extratheatrical acquaintance',[4] therefore 'haunting the space of performance'.[5] Whilst the space of performance may refer to the theatre venue itself, I will pay close attention to the contextual location, which, according to Harvie, has a direct impact upon performative meaning.[6] It is thus important to acknowledge the established reputation of the West End, and its role within theatrical culture, before further examining its influence upon *Les Misérables* and *Matilda*. As the home of British commercial theatre, the West End

[1] Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. 135.
[2] First premiered at the Barbican Theatre, London, 8 October 1985.
[3] First premiered at the Courtyard Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 24 November 2010.
[4] Carlson, p. 134.
[5] Ibid., p. 132.
[6] Jen Harvie, *Theatre & the City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 25.

adopts a cultural pre-eminence in British heritage and tradition. It is a conceptual location, rather than a defined geographical area, and has for many centuries been associated with activities of pleasure and recreation. Within this cultural vortex of commercial entertainment, theatre is described by Bennett as the 'premium cultural product'.[7] Likewise, the West End's central London location is significant, a city popularly regarded as is the 'theatre capital of the world'.[8] Furthering this view, it is possible to assert that London is more broadly a capital of cultural pre-eminence. The city is internationally recognised for its cultural products and activities, all of which essentially evoke local distinctiveness.[9] As such, I would argue that art and leisure, including theatre, all contribute to London's cultural identity, and thus lead to the consciousness of this cultural signification in the individual theatregoer.

The history of London and the West End is palpable, and cultural heritage is important to locals, providing a 'connection to their histories and their collective memories',[10] which forms a cultural 'consciousness' as termed by Carlson. For tourists, this history and tradition, which is integral to the cultural identity of London, is a primary reason for visiting the city. Culture becomes part of a distinct urban experience; as Ibell writes, tourists visit 'to share the centuries-old experience of being part of English theatre'.[11] The *Visit London* website, an online tourist guide, argues that the 'most famous thing about London's West End is its theatre scene', which represents 'the highest quality theatre in the world'.[12] This view epitomises the international reputation of the West End as 'Theatreland',[13] the home of high-quality British theatre. As such, an audience will bring pre-constructed expectations of the cultural products of the West End, a consciousness which would inevitably affect an individual's initial experience of a production. As Carlson suggests, the fame of London's West End can lead both local and international audiences to expect particular genres and standards of production.[14] Currently, the West End is principally associated with commercial theatre, exemplified by both *Les Misérables* and *Matilda*.

I will first examine the significance of the West End location in relation to Britain's first megamusical, *Les Misérables*, produced by Cameron Mackintosh in collaboration with the RSC. *Les Misérables* premiered in 1985 at London's Barbican Theatre, before transferring to the West End's Palace Theatre. It has since been relocated to Queen's Theatre, and now stands as the longest running musical in British history. Due to its global success, *Les Misérables* is regarded as a modern megamusical, a phenomenon which originated in the West End, defined by Lacey as 'the most visible symbol of the commodification of British theatre'.[15] As such, *Les Misérables* contributes to the cultural construction of the West End as the home of modern musical theatre, holding a greater longevity and permanence here than in any other location. In light of this, I would argue that *Les Misérables* haunts the West End itself, due to its local and global dominance in the theatre industry. It is thus relevant to highlight the reversibility of Carlson's theories of the 'haunted site' of performance, by asserting that the reputation of a production can contribute to the identity of the theatre location. A review of *Les Misérables* from *London Theatreland* pronounces the musical as 'the pride of the West End',[16] affirming such ideas of its cultural prevalence in this urban

[7] Susan Bennett, 'Theatre/Tourism', *Theatre Journal*, 57:3 (2005), p. 409.
[8] Paul Ibell, *Theatreland* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 14.
[9] Charles Landry, 'London as a Creative City', in *Creative Industries*, ed. John Hartley (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 239
[10] Landry, p. 239.
[11] Ibell, p. 15.
[12] 'London's West End', *Visit London*, http://www.visitlondon.com/discover-london/london-areas/central/west-end [accessed: 22/04/2014].
[13] Ibell, p. 16.
[14] Carlson, p. 162.
[15] Stephen Lacey, 'The British Theatre and Commerce', in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*, *Volume III,* ed. Baz Kershaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 438.
[16] 'The Pride of the West End Still Rules', *London Theatreland*, http://www.london-theatreland.co.uk/theatres/queens-theatre/les-miserables-review.php [accessed: 23/04/14].

theatre environment. There is little emphasis in such reviews upon the individual theatre venue and its own heritage and performative history. Similarly, while Carlson argues that the space of performance influences the reception of the dramatic event,[17] he also suggests that individual theatres in the West End have no particular influence upon audience preconception and reception, 'almost totally interchangeable in the public imagination and memory'.[18] Accordingly, the audience's preoccupation is with the production in its West End location, an environment which instigates the expectation of the impressive spectacle typical of the commercial theatre district. However, contrastingly, the internationality of *Les Misérables* obscures the prominence of the West End environment, marketed by Mackintosh as 'an event to see, no matter the location'.[19] The international appeal of this production is irrefutable, watched by over 65 million people in 22 languages around the globe.[20] I would suggest that, whilst the associations of its London location are undeniable, the global success of *Les Misérables* has perhaps reduced the production's peculiarity to the West End. As a result, the performance location arguably becomes less significant than the production 'event' itself. It is hence important to stress that an audience's 'cultural constructions' are formed both in the basis of the production's international reputation and pre-eminence, as well as in the consciousness of its renowned West End location.

Matilda the Musical is currently a more localised production, having only recently been transferred to Broadway in 2013. Written by playwright Dennis Kelly and composed by Tim Minchin, *Matilda* was produced in collaboration with the RSC, and premiered in Stratford-Upon-Avon's The Courtyard Theatre in 2010. A year later, it was transferred to the West End's Cambridge Theatre. The concept of the West End transfer is significant when considering the nature of audience expectation and reception. For many, a transfer onto a West End stage could be regarded as a measure of success, an association formed by the renowned 'cultural construction' of this theatrical location. On Minchin's official website, an account of the development of *Matilda* suggests a sense of triumph in the achievement of a West End transfer, declaring, 'Matilda the Musical could stand tall and announce that it was heading to the Cambridge Theatre, in London's West End'.[21] This demonstrates that the cultural dominance of the West End can directly influence a production's self-efficacy and reputation, allowing audiences to assert a level of success, categorising productions such as *Matilda* in the realm of popular commercial musicals.

An observation of *Matilda*'s primary audience is also significant to the 'cultural construction' of the West End as the location of historically preeminent theatre. Based on a children's novel, *Matilda* inevitably appeals to young audiences. By enticing children and adolescents to the West End, the predominance of this theatrical location becomes 'implanted in the consciousness' of young minds. As Carlson argues, 'it is memory that supplies the codes and strategies that shape reception'.[22] A child's early experience of the West End production of *Matilda* would therefore contribute to the 'memory bank' which shapes their subsequent reception of theatre.[23] Similarly, *Les Misérables* holds workshops for school visits, which provide an insight into the history and creation of the musical.[24] Educational visits such as this, based in the West End at the site of performance, reinforce the predominance of both the production and location. This involvement and interaction with children is a mode by which the theatrical association of London's West End becomes ingrained in the 'cultural construction' of society.

[17] Carlson, p. 132.
[18] Carlson, p. 162.
[19] Jessica Sternfeld, *The Megamusical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 218.
[20] 'Facts and Figures', *Les Misérables*, http://www.lesmis.com/uk/history/facts-and-figures/ [accessed: 26/04/2014].
[21] 'Matilda the Musical Story', *Tim Minchin.com*, http://www.timminchin.com/matilda/ [accessed: 22/04/2014].
[22] Carlson, p. 5.
[23] Carlson, p. 136.
[24] 'Education', Les *Misérables*, http://www.lesmis.com/uk/education/ [accessed 02/05/14].

The 'cultural construction' of people, as well as places, also strongly influences an audience's response. Both *Les Misérables* and *Matilda* are fundamentally associated with individuals that are recognisable to an audience under Carlson's 'operations of fame'. For instance, several members of the cast at the Barbican premiere of *Les Misérables* would have been familiar to its 1985 audience, arguably famous through appearances in television dramas and theatre performances. Colm Wilkinson, as Jean Valjean, was known for his own solo music career, whilst Roger Allem, as Javert, was widely recognised for his numerous performances for the RSC. According to Carlson, the theatre experience can be 'haunted' by the appearance of these familiar individuals, as direct personal experience and cultural memory of celebrities can, through the operations of the media, 'provide powerful hauntings of the reception of the material quite external to the performance at hand'.[25] Therefore, prior associations with well-known figures can contribute to the cultural memorialization that inevitably influences an audience's experience.

However, I intend to study to *Les Misérables* with a specific focus upon the undisputable figurehead of the production, Sir Cameron Mackintosh. Through his success in the world of commercial musical theatre, Mackintosh has become an internationally distinguished name. He is primarily associated with the West End, owning several venues under Delfront Mackintosh Theatres. Rivellino describes Mackintosh as the only 'giant' left in the business, 'a rare and unique impresario',[26] and this public recognition is further proven through numerous renowned accolades. Mackintosh was the first British theatre producer to be inducted into the Broadway Theatre Hall of Fame, and in 1996 was knighted for his services to musical theatre.[27] He is therefore an internationally renowned individual whose reputation could certainly be defined under Carlson's 'operations of fame'. In his chapter 'The Haunted Production', Carlson highlights the importance of the director in the nature of audience expectation, specifically with regards to previous repertoire, as audiences 'bring to the experience memories of earlier productions by these directors',[28] and the awareness of these past productions will 'bear upon their expectations and their reception of subsequent work'.[29] It is fitting, therefore, that Rivellino asserts that Mackintosh's productions overtly 'bear his imprint',[30] implying that his theatrical products evoke a recognisable style. Indeed, Mackintosh instantly furthered his reputation in 1986 through his collaboration with Andrew Lloyd Weber on the hugely successful *Phantom of the Opera*. Carlson further suggests that the director or producer is conscious of the audience's processes of pre-construction, which are used to an advantage in creative marketing. Mackintosh actively promotes his own contribution to the success of *Les Misérables*, as he states on the official webpage, 'the part I played in bringing *Les Misérables* to life as a musical will remain one of my proudest achievements'.[31] Such rhetoric is amplified on his official website, which marks the production as his own global cultural product; 'Cameron Mackintosh's legendary production of Boublil and Schönberg's *Les Misérables* is a global stage sensation'.[32] As such, *Les Misérables* is irrefutably associated with Mackintosh, forming the cultural construction of his public identity and theatrical brand, through which audiences create a pre-conceived expectation of his productions. Audiences are perhaps comforted in the anticipation of the spectacle of a Mackintosh megamusical that millions of others have also watched and

[25] Carlson, p. 135.
[26] Steven Rivellino, *Bright Lights, Big Changes* (Google e-book: Xlibris Corporation, 2004),p. 112.
[27] 'Cameron Mackintosh inducted into Broadway Hall of Fame', *BBC News* (January 2014), http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-25920992 [accessed: 22/04.2014].
[28] Carlson, p. 103.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Rivellino, p. 112.
[31] Cameron Mackintosh, 'Creation of a Musical', http://www.lesmis.com/uk/history/creation-of-a-musical/ [accessed: 22/04/2014].
[32] 'About Les Misérables', *Cameron Mackintosh*, http://www.cameronmackintosh.com/productions/london/les-miserables [accessed: 22/04/2014].

enjoyed. This clearly demonstrates the influence that the 'operations of fame' can have upon the reputation of a production, as well as the nature of an audience's initial response to the theatrical experience.

Whilst Mackintosh's name bears cultural significance in the theatre world, the cultural identity of Roald Dahl is even more powerful in bringing 'nontheatrical resonances' to the theatre experience of *Matilda the Musical*.[33] Roald Dahl is arguably 'implanted' in the consciousness of British culture through the popularity of his children's novels, which have been adapted both to screen and stage. The RSC were keen to promote *Matilda* in relation to its original authorship, with Dahl's name appearing clearly above the production logo [Fig. 1]. Numerous studies exemplify Dahl's popularity amongst British readers. In a survey for the *Young Telegraph*, eight out of the top ten most popular titles were novels by Dahl,[34] and in 2007, Dahl was labelled as the most popular children's author among young adults.[35] Similarly, Maynard and Mcknight define Dahl as 'a very popular British author', and 'a writer of modern classics'.[36] He is therefore a famous individual, whose work is valuable to Britain's cultural identity, subsequently impacting upon the expectations and preconceptions of the *Matilda* audience. Through the reputation of his work, audience members would be accustomed to his classic stories and literary style. It is thus relevant to acknowledge Carlson's argument that 'the role of memory and ghosting contributes significantly to the pleasure and motivation of the young theatregoer'.[37] Indeed, a preconceived awareness of the style and spirit of Dahl's stories is part of the individual's 'cultural construction', influencing one's experience of *Matilda the Musical*. Critics' reviews reflect the level of success in the stage adaptation of Dahl's literary spirit, as Carter writes for *The Observer*, 'it's hard to imagine a show capturing the spirit of Roald Dahl's literary world more perfectly than this one'.[38] Therefore, the audience's familiarity with this writer's work would inevitably lead to pre-conceptions and judgements upon the tone of the production.

In addition to Dahl, composer and lyricist Tim Minchin can also be defined under Carlson's 'operations of fame'. As a popular musician and comedian, Minchin is a celebrity figure, having frequently appeared on stage and television. Interestingly, the webpage of *Matilda* makes sure to endorse the celebrity status of Minchin, listing popular television appearances, such as *Friday Night with Jonathan Ross* and *Never Mind the Buzzcocks*.[39] Significantly, the BBC describes *Matilda* as 'comedian Tim Minchin's musical take on Roald Dahl's classic story',[40] drawing a parallel between both individuals in their association with the production. With his status as a celebrity comedian and musician, Minchin's involvement evokes a modernised and witty approach, contributing to the audience's expectations of the style of production. In her review for *The Guardian*, Love evokes the sense that this celebrity figure is modernising and updating the original story, 'marrying his own brand of irreverence with that of Dahl's and throwing some wickedly clever rhymes into the bargain'.[41] Therefore, *Matilda* is integrally associated with two individuals who, through different creative mediums, could both be termed as famous, allowing audience members to draw upon

[33] Carlson, p. 134.
[34] Sally Maynard and Cliff McKnight, 'Author popularity: an exploratory study based on Roald Dahl', *New review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 8:2 (2002), p. 153.
[35] 'Dahl beats Rowling as young adults' favourite author', *The Guardian* (September 2007), http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/sep/11/jkjoannekathleenrowling.roalddahl [accessed: 23/04/2014].
[36] Maynard and McKnight, p. 153.
[37] Carlson, p. 98
[38] Imogen Carter, 'Matilda the Musical- review', *The Observer* (September 2011), http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/nov/27/matilda-the-musical-roald-dahl [accessed: 23/04/2014].
[39] 'Tim Minchin', *Matilda the Musical*, http://uk.matildathemusical.com/creative/tim-minchin/ [accessed: 23/04/2014].
[40] 'Matilda the Musical proves a hit with West End Critics', *BBC News* (November 2011), http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-15886443 [accessed: 23/04/2014].
[41] Catherine Love, 'Musicals we love: Matilda', *The Guardian* (April 2014), http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/apr/07/musicals-we-love-matilda [accessed: 23/04/2014].

'cultural constructions' of these persons to establish preconceived opinions of the theatrical product.

It is also important to consider the difficulties and variances in an audience's response to the adaptation of a familiar cultural product. Like people and places, a well-known novel, such as *Matilda*, contributes to the process of 'cultural memoralization',[42] bringing another 'extratheatrical acquaintance' to the theatre experience.[43] With regards to *Matilda*, an audience is likely to be accustomed to the novel and its characters in a way that evokes the familiarity with celebrity figures. Well-known characters can therefore be included within Carlson's 'operations of fame'. Audience members are confronted with characters that they have previously encountered through the act of reading, leading to the 'haunting' of the production. Like celebrity, the prior acquaintance with *Matilda* and its characters is thus powerful in securing a substantial audience. It offers a product that the potential spectator feels accustomed to, as Lacey comments, 'the adaptation is a key postmodern cultural product, …offering the audience the pleasure of familiarity with a 'new twist' provided by the transfer to another medium'.[44] However, with this sense of familiarity, especially in a product that is cherished by British literary culture, there is a potential risk in audience response. One review for *Theatres.TV* evokes frustration with the portrayal of the story's most iconic characters, stating, 'Bettie Carvel's performance as Miss Trunchbull devalues the character originally penned by Dahl', and 'Lauren Ward struggles to find any depth as Miss Honey…, bearing no resemblance to the original book'.[45] For this theatregoer, the memories and resonances of the original book have led to dissatisfaction with the musical adaptation. It should be noted that *Les Misérables* is also an adaptation of the renowned canonical novel by Victor Hugo, first published in 1862. However, I would argue that in this case, the story and characters themselves have become broadly recognisable through the success of the musical itself. For instance, the character of Cozette has become internationally eminent, with the lithograph of her face [Fig. 2] marking the territory of the Queen's Theatre [Fig. 3], and appearing upon almost every piece of *Les Misérables* marketing material, worldwide. She is a character that becomes instantly identifiable with this megamusical. Lacey draws attention to the prominence of Cozette's lithograph, which both signals and 'stands in' for the show.[46] Therefore, the image itself operates as a manner of 'haunting', creating the visual 'memoralization' of the young character among audience members before having experienced the production. Both *Matilda* and *Les Misérables* demonstrate that through the mode of adaptation, characters can function within the 'operations of fame', forming part of the 'cultural construction' that influences a spectator's preconceptions, and subsequent reception.

While Carlson notes the fame of 'individual human beings' in 'cultural construction', it is also important to draw attention to the signification of names, if not necessarily of individuals. Both *Matilda* and *Les Misérables* were produced in collaboration with the RSC. The identity of Shakespeare is fundamental to the reputation of this company, evoking powerful cultural resonances. Its cultural pre-eminence need not be debated; Shakespeare's name holds an innate and unrivalled significance in the heritage of British theatre, forming an instinctive part of the consciousness of London's theatrical identity. The visual marketing material for *Matilda* [Fig. 4] comprises the visually recognisable RSC logo, overtly displaying its association with the company to potential audiences. I would argue that producers are keen to promote this collaboration due to the notion of the legitimisation of

[42] Carlson, p. 135.
[43] Ibid., p. 134.
[44] Lacey, p. 435.
[45] 'Matilda the Musical review', *Theatre.TV* (6 May 2011), http://www.theatres.tv/reviews/matilda-the-musical-review/ [accessed: 23/04/2013].
[46] Lacey, p. 443.

theatre, which according to Sternfield, implies 'not only governmental endorsement, but a certain weightiness not associated with popular new musicals'.[47] As such, through the fame of a world-renowned theatre company, a 'cultural construction' is formed in which audiences expect a certain standard of acting talent and theatrical rigour. The *British Theatre Guide* highlights that both *Matilda* and *Les Misérables* were produced in collaboration with the RSC, identifying this as an indication of *Matilda*'s future international success; 'the RSC gave birth to the world's longest running musical and, a quarter of a century after *Les Misérables* made its debut, the company might be about to repeat the trick'.[48] Not only does the label of the RSC induce preconceptions of legitimate theatre, it also affects the interrelation of productions and the measures of their potential success. This evokes the process of haunting, with one production reflecting another, and even maintaining the hope for a similar level of success. *Matilda*, through the RSC association, becomes related to *Les Misérables*, and as such, audiences and critics form an increased expectation of its success, inevitably affecting the initial production experience.

To conclude, my study of the West End in relation to two popular musical productions has enabled me to demonstrate Carlson's suggestion of the 'cultural construction' of theatre locations. The notion of the West End as the home of commercial theatre is very much imbedded in the reputation of both *Les Misérables* and *Matilda*. I have revealed the ways in which a consciousness of the cultural identity of a theatre environment can affect the initial experience of the individual audience member. I have also studied the influence of fame and celebrity in audience reception; the names and identities attached to both productions, and the preconceptions that can be formed by an audience through the imbedded memory of both theatrical and non-theatrical associations. Although Carlson's quotation refers to 'individual human beings', I believe that this notion should be extended to consider the fictional characters that are renowned through their prominence in literature and visual publicity, as well as company names that denote certain styles and standards of theatre. Overall, I would agree with Carlson in asserting that the 'operations of fame' can directly affect the initial experience of a cultural product, and would argue that these resonances can be formed, not only from places and people, but from a variety of cultural reference points.

[47] Sternfeld, p. 180.
[48] Phillip Fisher, 'Matilda the Musical', *British Theatre Guide* (2011), http://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/RSCmatilda-rev [accessed: 22/04/2014].

Figure 1. Logo for *Matilda the Musical*, http://www.thecornershoppr.com/press/matilda_a musical [accessed 28/04/14].

Figure 2. Lithograph of Cozette as used in publicity for *Les Misérables*, http://www.trinitywheeleronline.com/slideshow/slideshow.html [accessed 28/04/2014].

Figure 3. Exterior of Queen's Theatre, London, displaying the poster for *Les Misérables* http://www.theaterseatstore.com/best-theater-ticket-deals [accessed 28/04/2014].

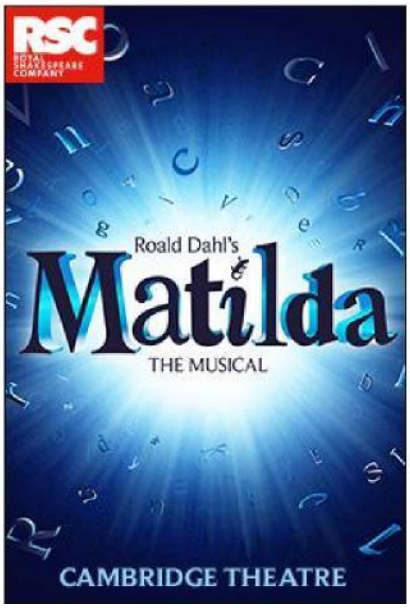

Figure 4. Poster for *Matilda the Musical*, showing RSC logo, http://www.londontheatrebookings.com/ [accessed 29/04/2014]

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