



Analyse the Extent to Which Controversial Theatre can be Accommodated on a West End Stage.

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Jane Milling asserts that London's West End (WE) is familiar to tourist audiences for its 'remarkably stable' repertoire, consisting largely of 'literary musical adaptations', 'musical adaptations of films' and 'compilation musicals of popular musical trends'.¹ This suggests that the WE is almost entirely motivated by the commercial successes of the megamusical. Audiences have a 'horizon of expectations' when they visit a WE theatre, as they associate the area with a particular cultural experience.² New work is measured against the audience's expectations and 'The closer it correlates with this horizon, the more likely it is to be low, pulp, or "culinary" art'.³ This disparaging perspective is shared by many in the industry; indeed, Peter Brook argues that during the mid-twentieth century, shows had become 'weak, watery, repetitive, drab and silly'.⁴ However, there have been challenges to these long-running musical productions, leading to the development of more innovative theatre. This essay will focus on the work of the Royal Court (RC), in particular, Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem*, and the journey of *Jerry Springer*, *The Opera* from scratch theatre to the WE. Citing Frank Parkin's model of 'social democracies', it will be explored how far and in what ways these examples of controversial theatre abide by the 'dominant system' established in the WE: of palatable, long-running musicals.⁵ By focusing on modes of controversy, the idea of celebrity, processes of production and critical response, this essay will determine whether *Springer* and *Jerusalem* abide by a 'subordinate system', and thus comprehend and comply with the dominant, or whether they are being 'radical' and oppose any sense of a normative status, deviating too far from audiences' 'horizon of expectations'.

Springer sets out with the intention of challenging its audiences' 'horizon of expectations' by combining high and low culture. This is clear in the 'semiotics of the title' which directly relates the name of the low culture reality television show with the high art of opera.⁶ This violation of cultural expectations is continued in the collapse of rigid divisions between musical styles. Dominic Symonds explains that *Springer*'s 'identity as a musical is complex' because 'much of the vocal aesthetic is more characteristic of an operatic... sound', yet its 'internal rhetorical structure... uses many traditional musical theatre elements' such as an 'Opening Number', and leaving act one on a cliffhanger.⁷ This musical innovation has cast *Springer* as a 'unique' production.⁸ However, in mixing musical styles this does not destroy all ties to the WE. Michael Billington connects aspects of the production with previous theatrical successes, arguing that 'a precedent... would be *The Threepenny Opera*' and 'the second act finale is as funny as anything in *The Producers*'.⁹ In making these comparisons, he is positioning the opera within a broad trajectory of theatre history which validates its creative innovation. Co-writer Stewart Lee has defended the opera as the 'answer' to a 'crisis in music theatre' as new material was lacking, suggesting that *Springer* was helping to develop, rather than damage, the WE stage.¹⁰

Springer's bold creativity would not have been possible without the expertise of the team which developed the opera from scratch theatre to WE success. All involved had some degree of familiarity with the commercial mainstream: Richard Thomas and Stewart Lee had already worked together on *Attention Scum* for the BBC, a series of sketches set to music which, conceptually, share similarities with *Springer*.¹¹ With the support of producer Jon Thoday, managing director of the production company

¹ Jane Milling, *Modern British Playwriting: The 1980s: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations* (London: Methuen Drama, 2012), p. 43.

² Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 49.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Peter Brook, 'Oh for Empty Seats!', in *New Theatre Voices of the Fifties and Sixties: selections from Encore Magazine 1956-1963*, ed. by Charles Marowitz, Tom Milne and Owen Hales (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), p. 68.

⁵ Frank Parkin, *Class, Inequality and Political Order* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1972), pp. 81-2.

⁶ Dominic Symonds, 'The Resistible Rise of Jerry Springer: How an Opera Revived the Polemical Stage', in *Brecht, Broadway and United States Theater*, ed. by J. Chris Westgate (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Pub., 2007), p. 151.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 151, 154.

⁸ Anna Picard, 'JER-RY! JER-RY! JER-RY!' (August 2001) <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/jer-ry-jer-ry-jer-ry-9191542.html>> [accessed 13 March 2016].

⁹ Michael Billington, 'Jerry Springer – The Opera' (April 2003)

<<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2003/apr/30/theatre.artsfestivals2>> [accessed 13 March 2016].

¹⁰ Stewart Lee and Richard Thomas, 'Story of a Musical', *Jerry Springer the Opera* (TV Movie), dir. by Peter Orton (Avalon Television Ltd. and Pathé Distribution Ltd., 2005).

¹¹ Ibid.

Avalon, and later Nicholas Hytner, new artistic director of the National Theatre, the venture was given financial support.¹² Lee explains that 'It wasn't until we got to the National Theatre and there was money' that the more spectacular aspects of the show were made possible, such as Springer's elevated gibbet. This demonstrates that a bigger budget was necessary to its success so that it could move beyond fringe theatre and compete with WE fare.¹³ The musical's innovation was key to this financial backing.

Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem*, although it also deals in explicit content, primarily inherited its controversy from the turbulent history of the RC. Since the beginning of the twentieth century and the display of George Bernard Shaw's work on its stage, there has been a perceived incompatibility between the work of the RC and the WE. The RC's mission statement declares that it 'is the leading force in world theatre for energetically cultivating writers - undiscovered, new, and established'.¹⁴ As 'Much of London's West End is made up of commercial receiving houses. Many of... [which] are owned by entertainment conglomerates' such as Andrew Lloyd Webber's 'Really Useful Group' and 'Cameron Mackintosh Ltd.', the RC believes it is their duty to support these 'new' and 'undiscovered' writers who would otherwise struggle to establish themselves.¹⁵ However, their bold rhetoric has been questioned with the suggestion of a commercial imperative. There is a long history of successful transfer from RC to the WE: Laura Wade's *Posh* was housed at the Duke of York's Theatre (2012), went on to premiere at other regional theatres and was even adapted for film in 2013 (*The Riot Club*). Although Wade's commercial success is not traceable in all of the RC's transfers, it is testament to a growing acknowledgement that 'every theatre *must pay its way* – because no one however idealistic can remain in business at a permanent loss'.¹⁶ For a theatre which has been seen to consider 'success as some sort of evil', and has even advocated financial risk through empty seats in order to attract new audiences, this alternatively frames the RC as being dependent on their difficult relationship with the WE to ensure the success of their drama.¹⁷ Therefore, while their ethos promotes a 'radical' theatre, it would be more accurate to suggest that they accept a 'subordinate' position in order to continue with their more innovative work.

Graeme Turner recognises that 'celebrities are... 'property'... they are a financial asset to those who stand to gain from their commercialisation'.¹⁸ The casting of Mark Rylance as Rooster Byron in *Jerusalem* is a clear example of a production exploiting its star actor's cultural status, as a means of garnering audience interest. Rylance has a long history as a Shakespearean actor and during his tenure as artistic director of the Globe (1995-2005), he performed in seventeen roles, from Henry V to Hamlet.¹⁹ His connection to canonical drama invests Rylance with 'cultural capital' and his performances bring with them an attachment to Shakespeare and respected drama; indeed, 'Shakespeare's association with a mass-cultural product, medium, or genre lends that item a moiety of highbrow depth'.²⁰ In this way, Rylance's body is 'haunted' by its connection to Shakespeare, raising the status of his subsequent projects.²¹ Reviews of the production focus on Rylance's 'thrilling' performance as Byron, and his celebrated status is clear in one interviewer's assertion that, 'I have never read a bad review for Mark Rylance'.²² He is elevated from the position of actor to a key developer of the play. Charles Spencer hints at this when he voices that 'Butterworth and Rylance keep us guessing to the end' (my italics).²³ Butterworth has explained that there was something about the character which Rylance 'wanted to delve into and to bring out', independently researching the real Byron, 'Micky Doo', and drawing on figures from his childhood.²⁴ Thus the process of developing Byron is specific to Rylance's input and

¹² Anna M. Dempster, 'Managing Uncertainty in Creative Industries: Lessons from *Jerry Springer the Opera*', *Creativity and Innovation Management*, 15:3 (2006), 228-9.

¹³ Lee and Thomas, 'Story'.

¹⁴ 'About Us', Royal Court Theatre <<http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/about-us/>> [accessed 13th March 2016].

¹⁵ Gill Foreman, *Practical Guide to Working in Theatre* (London: Methuen Drama, 2009), p. 3.

¹⁶ Brook, 'Oh for Empty Seats!', p. 71.

¹⁷ Philip Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 140; Brook, 'Oh for Empty Seats!', p. 74.

¹⁸ Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity* (London: SAGE Publications, 2004), pp. 34-5.

¹⁹ Christie Carson and Farah Karim-Cooper, *Shakespeare's Globe: A Theatrical Experiment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. xiv-xv.

²⁰ Douglas Lanier, 'Recent Shakespeare Adaptation and the Mutations of Cultural Capital', *Shakespeare Studies*, 38 (2010), 104-113 (p. 104).

²¹ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. 134.

²² Charles Spencer, 'Jerusalem, Apollo Theatre, review' (October 2011) <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/8833062/Jerusalem-Apollo-Theatre-review.html>> [accessed 13 March 2016]; Interview with Rylance and Butterworth (2011) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ENEoRHLuZ1I>> [accessed 14 March 2016].

²³ Charles Spencer, 'Jerusalem – at the Royal Court Theatre, review' (July 2009)

<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/charles-spencer/5841324/Jerusalem-at-the-Royal-Court-Theatre-review.html>> [accessed 13 March 2016].

²⁴ Interview with Rylance and Butterworth.

personal experiences. Although actors have frequently been substituted for five of the characters in the play, Rylance has remained as Byron throughout its production history: *Byron is Rylance*.²⁵ The marketing of the production has repeatedly drawn attention to this on posters by placing Rylance's name above the name of the play itself, showing that it is largely the actor which is gathering audience interest (see appendix). Rylance's face also adorns the updated front cover of the play, demonstrating the extent to which he has become associated with the play text itself. The way Rylance is marketed as a cultural icon suggests that *Jerusalem* has been produced with a degree of commercial drive, normally attributed to the WE stage.

The celebrity of *Springer* is contained within the reality show itself and this is reflected in the marketing. The iconic logo of the television show is recreated on the production posters: the font and slant of 'Springer' draws a visual association between the production and the original show (see appendix). However, 'Jerry Springer' is engulfed in flames which contrasts with 'the opera' in bright white font as a reminder that this production is radically different. The celebrity attached to the real Jerry Springer aided publicity when he visited during Edinburgh fringe and the WE runs. As with Rylance's acting career, celebrity 'generated by cultural memory and the operations of the media, can provide hauntings of the reception by material quite external to the performance at hand'.²⁶ Therefore, although Springer is 'external to the performance', his attendance at Edinburgh complicates the ghosting in this production. This is made more complex by the celebrity of the actors who played Springer: Michael Brandon and David Soul. This layering of celebrity is a feature of musicals such as *Funny Girl*: based on the life of film star Fanny Brice, the role was famously filled by Barbra Streisand in the 1968 film, and has been reprised for the WE with Sheridan Smith (2016). As Carlson explains, 'An audience member, bombarded with a variety of stimuli, processes them by selectively applying reception strategies remembered from previous situations', and in the case of *Springer*, the audience is expected to draw on their knowledge of the TV show, musical theatre, opera and the histories of the show's celebrities.²⁷ The particularly complex layering of celebrity contributes to the stretching of audiences' 'horizon of expectations'.

The multi-layered production process behind *Springer* was conceived at Battersea Arts Centre (BAC), where writer Richard Thomas performed *How to write an Opera about Jerry Springer*.²⁸ His controversial idea was gradually introduced to audiences through scratch theatre which originated with BAC's artistic director Tom Morris.²⁹ The idea behind it 'was to integrate audiences into the developmental process of theatre' so that the outcome would be more collaborative.³⁰ The 'beer for an idea' scheme asked the audience to volunteer ideas in return for a can of beer as a form of payment for their contribution, allowing *Springer* to go through a series of informed changes and improvements.³¹ Its showcasing at the Edinburgh Fringe was another gradual step towards the WE because the festival 'provided exposure to a more diverse, yet receptive, audience... [which was] an important test of the production's wider appeal'; however, marketing materials usually associated with WE musicals were not responsible for its popularity at this stage.³² Instead, word of mouth spread so rapidly that on 'day 1, 80 people [saw the production and on] day 2, 750', indicating that *Springer* immediately gained a notoriety.³³ Lee and Thomas deliberately chose their next venue, the National, as a means of 'extend[ing] the joke'; they took 'a stupid idea, turn[ed] it into an opera – and now we're doing it in the temple of culture'.³⁴ The prestigious associations attached to this institution not only raised the profile of the musical, but gave it a certain creative validity. The show's 'ruthless re-writing' and 'public editing' allowed *Springer* to reach the WE; however, once established, the notoriety which had initially drawn audiences struggled to ensure it remained on the stage.³⁵ The producers failed to recognise the implications of *Springer*'s position as radical theatre within a dominant system. Unlike RC plays such as *Jerusalem*, which were specifically marketed for a limited run of twelve weeks (see appendix), *Springer* aimed for more long term commercial success.³⁶ Despite its rising reputation, the musical proved unable to accommodate WE expectations.

²⁵ Jez Butterworth, *Jerusalem* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2014), pp. 2-3.

²⁶ Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, p. 135.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 5-6.

²⁸ Dempster, 'Managing Uncertainty', p. 227.

²⁹ Helen Eastman, 'Chorus in Contemporary British Theatre', in *Choruses, Ancient and Modern*, ed. by Joshua Billings, Felix Budelmann and Fiona Mackintosh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 366.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 366.

³¹ Dempster, 'Managing Uncertainty', p. 227.

³² Ibid., p. 229.

³³ Lee and Thomas, 'Story'.

³⁴ Daniel Rosenthal, *The National Theatre Story* (Islington: Oberon Books, 2013), p. 705.

³⁵ Dempster, 'Managing Uncertainty', p. 231.

³⁶ Ibid.

The RC revels in the disparity between the work it produces and the majority of WE fare. In tackling issues of sex, drugs and teenage delinquency, *Jerusalem's* content draws on the RC's history of challenging drama. During the 1990s, the Court became associated with the emergence of 'in-yer-face' theatre. Aleks Sierz has characterised this as 'a theatre of sensation' which 'affronts the ruling ideas of what can or should be shown on stage'.³⁷ One of Butterworth's first plays, *Mojo*, premiered at the RC in 1995 and shared the stage with plays such as Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, which involves scenes of rape and cannibalism. Butterworth's involvement with the RC in the 1990s demonstrates his participation in a movement designed to challenge the established moral boundaries of theatre. Although *Jerusalem* premiered over a decade later, Butterworth's connection to this extreme period of drama is ghosted in his later work. Spencer alludes to this in his review of *Jerusalem*: 'A green and pleasant land at the Royal Court? You must be joking', addressing the theatre's controversial history through discussion of *Jerusalem*.³⁸

Crucially, *Jerusalem* is underpinned by a kind of realism which makes its transfer to the WE feasible. Unlike Kane's *Blasted*, *Jerusalem* explores a group of people who bear some relation to the lives of audience members; teenage rebellion and the feeling of being an outsider are understandable concepts. The WE programme notes that 'The English are afraid of their myths – intimidated by their stories [...] Maybe we are afraid of seeing our faces in the reflection'.³⁹ *Jerusalem*, therefore, continues the RC's mission of challenging audiences and making them confront their 'reflection'. This distinctive identity juxtaposes with the facelessness of most WE theatres. Individually, they 'are almost totally interchangeable in the public imagination and memory'.⁴⁰ For this reason, short runs in the WE are unlikely to jeopardise the Court's radical position because the plays fail to inherit another identity from their host WE theatre. Thus, *Jerusalem* is remembered for its origins at the RC because its distinctive history haunts audience memory.

The popularity and longevity of WE fare is governed primarily through a tourist audience, seeking to accrue 'cultural capital' by visiting the perceived home of theatre. Typically, this group is viewed as a 'singular and undiscriminating entity' buying into the commercial jargon and promised experience propounded by the entertainment conglomerates.⁴¹ For plays such as *Springer* and *Jerusalem* to survive on a WE stage, they too would need to attract this returning tourist audience. Theatre tourists are 'above-average spenders', paying out £983, compared to an average [tourist spend] of £600' on the show and additional services, such as pre-theatre dining, and production merchandise.⁴² *Springer* sought to emulate this by setting up an online store (www.jerryspringertheopera.com), selling items such as the 'Jerry, Jerry mug' and 'Magnetic poetry'.⁴³ The show took steps to conform to the commercial mainstream; however, the shift in critical opinion demonstrates that the rave reception for its performance as fringe theatre did not necessarily translate into positive reviews when it transferred to the WE. Picard's review of the show at BAC suggests that it was the 'perfect time' for *Springer's* development.⁴⁴ This support continued with Hytner because he wanted something 'new and fresh and disreputable', yet even at this stage, limitations were suggested when he continued that this should 'only [be] to the extent that theatre on the South Bank is historically disreputable'.⁴⁵ BAC, Edinburgh Fringe and the National are all institutions connected with innovation. However, with the WE's 'stable repertoire' and broad tourist audience, it does not perform the same role in supporting challenging theatre. Driven by profit, *Springer* at the Cambridge theatre charged ticket prices at market rate even though its target audience had been the 'youthful NME-reading market', indicating disagreement between the aims of *Springer* at fringe level and the mainstream.⁴⁶ Reviews became more mixed as the expectations of critics changed when the show was housed in different venues.⁴⁷ The focus on innovation was usurped by moral concerns about the material. The show's marketing attempted to address this issue: the promotion trailer features a very diverse audience, offering positive reviews of the show's controversial material.⁴⁸ The difficulty in translating *Springer* to a mass market audience is consciously realised through its marketing. Despite obvious attempts at

³⁷ Aleks Sierz, *In-yer-face theatre: British drama today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), pp. 4, 5.

³⁸ Spencer, 'Jerusalem – at the Royal Court Theatre'.

³⁹ Aleks Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today* (London: Methuen, 2011), p. 142.

⁴⁰ Carlson, p. 162.

⁴¹ Susan Bennett, 'Theatre/Tourism', *Theatre Journal*, 57:3 (2005), 407-428 (p. 409).

⁴² Alistair Smith, 'Theatre is a greater drive of tourism than sport' (November 2013)

<<https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2013/theatre-greater-driver-tourism-sport-visit-britain-report/>> [accessed 5 May 2016].

⁴³ Leaflet inside *Jerry Springer the Opera* (TV Movie), dir. by Peter Orton (Avalon Television Ltd. and Pathé Distribution Ltd., 2005).

⁴⁴ Picard, 'JER-RY!'.

⁴⁵ Rosenthal, *National Theatre Story*, p. 707.

⁴⁶ Dempster, 'Managing Uncertainty', p. 229.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 229.

⁴⁸ *Jerry Springer -The Opera* promo <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vpsd9XU05fU>> [accessed 13 March 2016].

reassurance, the producers' desire to maintain a larger audience base was made impossible by the leap between fringe and mainstream theatre.

The notoriously demanding critics Charles Spencer and Michael Billington have tracked the success of *Jerusalem* throughout its production history. Unlike *Springer*, both critics have remarked that the play benefits from repeat viewings which suggests that *Jerusalem* has the potential to attract a returning WE audience.⁴⁹ This would oppose the RC's mission, however, as they limit their plays to short runs on their own stage and in the WE to ensure the constant production of new drama.⁵⁰ With tourist audiences looking for a 'stable repertoire', the RC initiative is opposed to WE methods for securing returning audiences. However, it can be seen that the RC proposes an alternative national theatre venue for England; as they receive funding from Arts Council England and the British Council, among other investors, they are able to generate an independent audience which is not reliant on tourism in the same way as commercial theatre.⁵¹ Their unique draw means that of the '2.8 million visits to the theatre, musicals, the opera or ballet' in London, over '120,000' of them are to the RC.⁵² The theatre attracts an audience committed to new theatre, rather than offering a marketed leisure pursuit to those looking for something 'lightweight' and 'feel-good'.⁵³ *Jerusalem*, as a particular case study, managed to craft a space for itself within the WE, yet the creative motivation behind its production prevented its chances of becoming a long-running show.

During their times of production, *Springer* and *Jerusalem* both shared a difficult relationship with the WE. While *Jerusalem* revelled in this, perpetuating the RC's reputation as the home of innovative drama, *Springer* never achieved its intended levels of commercial success and closed at the Cambridge theatre in 2005 amid controversy.⁵⁴ Despite this, the production offered something new to the WE and received a number of awards, including an Olivier for Best Musical.⁵⁵ Its unique approach to musical innovation attracted a great deal of critical attention which allowed the show to rise from scratch theatre to the commercial mainstream. The fact that both shows achieved success for a limited run demonstrates that controversial theatre can exist within the WE. However, their content is not sustainable on the commercial stage and is instead more suited to the fringe and 'off' WE venues which initially fostered their development.

⁴⁹ Michael Billington, 'Jerusalem at the Apollo Theatre' (February 2010)

<<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/feb/10/jerusalem-review>> [accessed 5 May 2016]; Spencer (2011).

⁵⁰ Roberts, *Royal Court Theatre*, pp. 180-1.

⁵¹ 'Public Funding Bodies', *Royal Court Theatre* <<http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/support-us/our-supporters/public-funding-bodies/>> [accessed 05 May 2016].

⁵² Smith, 'Theatre is a greater drive'; <<http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/about-us/>>.

⁵³ Bennett, 'Theatre/Tourism', p. 407.

⁵⁴ Dempster, 'Managing Uncertainty', p. 231.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 230.

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Appendix

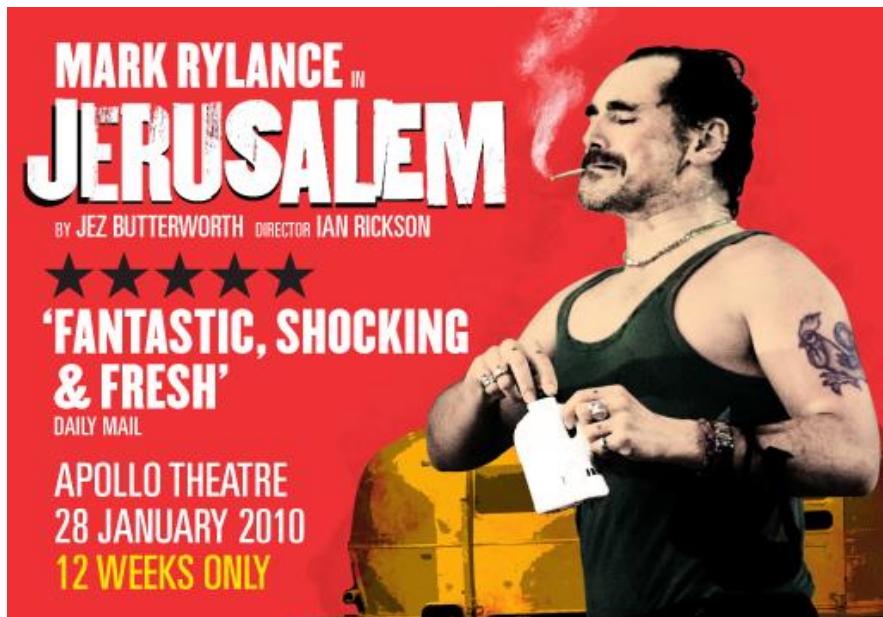


Figure 1. Production poster for *Jerusalem* at the Apollo Theatre in 2010.



Figure 2. Production poster for *Jerry Springer the Opera* at the Cambridge Theatre in 2003.



Figure 3. Logo for *The Jerry Springer Show*.