

Structured Song Recitals: An Innovation in Musical Theatre¹

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As several authors contributing to this volume have concluded, they are not dealing with entirely new forms of theater, but are rather introducing new variations on older forms, or to put it differently, they are describing the pouring of old wine into new bottles. This also applies to my article, though with a codicil. The theatrical genre to which my essay addresses itself, the musical revue and one of its sub-genres, contains in equal parts wine and vinegar. I have labeled this sub-genre, at a venture, “a structured recitation of songs.” What hides behind that label will be illustrated here by two exemplary twentieth-century stage works.

The musical revue has had a long, if not entirely honorable history. One can trace its origins to France, Britain and Germany and its temporal emergence to the early nineteenth century. As *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* would have it: “In review there are elements of other stage forms such as cabaret, variety show, vaudeville, pantomime, burlesque and musical comedy” (Lamb and Root 78). Another standard work on musical theater puts its history in terms more down to earth: “The art form [musical revue] would never have risen above its crude nineteenth-century antecedents in minstrel show, vaudeville show and burlesque, if it had not evolved with highly gifted artists” (Grant 113). Even at the point of its greatest fertility, the time between the world wars, it was the best showcase for emerging talent, such as the highly successful strings of *Earl Carroll's Vanities*² and at its worst, “a showcase for shivering ladies, too thinly clad for drafty theatre stages.”³

In the United States several sub-genres emerged, driven by new waves of influence from Europe. For one it was the political cabaret. A relatively rare import, it was nonetheless successful with a limited and sophisticated American audience. San Francisco's “The Capital Committee,” Chicago's “Second City” and a few other stages testify to its survival in today's America. Another offshoot was the intimate revue, performed mostly in night clubs and rooftop theatres. It was held together, if at all, by a thin plot or as a showcase for a single composer or

performer (Flinn 116). Yet another sub-genre, the so-called concept revue, emerged simultaneously, with coherence supplied by a single theme such as Da Silva, Brown and Henderson's *The Birth of the Blues*. In fact, sometimes, (in contrast to the intimate revue), so much plot was introduced into the concept revue that Stephen Sondheim, felt compelled to deconstruct again the close-knit coherence of these compact revues. His play *Company*, as beautifully documented in a film,⁴ meant yet another departure in the emergence of the concept musical.

So much for this brief, anything but exhaustive, sketch of the musical review. It was perhaps needed, since the complete study of the sub-genre revue so far exists.⁵ It is also needed since all its forms and variations are very much alive. That finding will confound the dreary conclusion on the subject in the *Musik Brockhaus*: "Seit dem 2. Weltkrieg sind die Revue-Theater fast verschwunden" (F. A. Brockhaus 493).

My topic concerns yet another aspect of this motley assembly of musical revues, which will also help to disprove the premature obituary set for it by the *Musik Brockhaus*. The song recital, to be discussed here, is a kind of musical revue with a distinct form of its own. Its distinction was not immediately felt when it first came center stage. Newspaper editors were at first in doubt as to whether to assign performances to music or theatre critics. In fact, when in the 1930's Betty Comdon and Adolph Green appeared in a nightclub act, *The Revuers*, for which they wrote their own songs and dialogue, reviews of their revue appeared in both musical and theatre columns (Ewen 635). A standard history of the musical theatre called the random recitals of tunes "Songs in Search of a Show" (Flinn 117).

And then along came a revue which, once more, broke all traditional molds. It was created by Eric Blau and Mark Shuman, two American collaborators who conceived of the idea of building a production around the songs of Jacques Brel, a Belgian composer and lyricist. In adhering to the theme of this volume, the exploration of "non-standard-forms," it can be stated at the outset that many of the reviewers found the show *Jacques Brel is Alive and Well* (Blau and Schuman) "to be unusual" and to be "extraordinary entertainment" (Gross 14). Also "it is the off-Broadway Theatre doing what it does best, what justifies its existence – presenting the unusual."⁶

Yet when it came to define the innovation, there was anything but unanimity. One critic called it a “Brel portfolio” (Whittaker 31); another offered not one but four definitions: “a presentation, a revue, a distillation of the songs and ideas of one of our more brilliant chansonniers [. . .]. This is not a show [. . .]. It is an experience.”⁷ Not to be outdone, yet another reviewer, no doubt a culinary critic called it, legitimately, a “pastiche,” but also, less fittingly, a “bouillabaisse.” (Harris 29)

Obviously the creators of the show who culled 16 songs from Brel’s repertoire of over 200, also puzzled over the work they had created. They were aware – with all modesty – that their creation was innovative, even if not a theatrical revolution. “Yet, historically speaking, *Jacques Brel’s* formal innovation is small. Like almost all other formal changes in the art it extends inherited experience to a greater or lesser degree without losing contact with what has preceded it” (Blau 7). One could even argue that classical music, say Schubert’s song cycles like “Die schöne Müllerin” or “Die schöne Magelone” were among the show’s ancestors. Also, Blau had the disconcerting experience that an informed theatre director told him after the show that a similar tradition in India antedated *Jacques Brel* by “more than fifteen hundred years” (Blau 60). Of course Blau and Shuman did not leave it at that.

We didn’t want it to be just a revue or just a concert. We wanted it to be ‘theatre’ and the big question was how to make it into theatre. I suppose you could say I had this animal feeling of what had to happen [...]. We were pretty sure we had something good – I suppose you could call it a Theatre of Song – but how could we try to explain it to audiences, to the press [...]. One critic later analyzed why the show worked so well and decided that what we had created was a libretto-less musical (Rubin 31).

Undoubtedly the creation is theatre. “Talk about dramatic possibilities and music” exclaimed a musicologist (Flinn 337). Of course its popularity as drama speaks for itself; it could not have weathered more than 1500 performances in Greenwich village, innumerable road shows and revivals, recordings and a film without its dramatic appeal. Nor would it have earned such appellations as “dramatic,” theatrical, seriocomic from the critics (Kraft 15). But after seeing the show several times, each performance at a different site, I think I have detected at least five elements, none of them necessarily new, which in the aggregate, metamorphose a mere presentation of songs by the same composer-

lyricist into musical theatre. Underlying this transformation is, of course, the consummate artistry – and fervor – of Jacques Brel and the range of his subjects, timeless and topical at the same time. They range from love to death, from bullfights to politics and from admiration to denigration of Brel's home country of Belgium. An additional component, contributive to the book's success, is the seamless translation of the French text and, where reasonable and plausible, the transformation of the French cultural setting into Americanese. As an example of the latter: where Brel in the song "Marathon," recalls excessive wine parties, we Americans hear of the "bathtub gin" of Prohibition days (Blau and Schuman 1).

What makes theatre and dramatic tension surge through the song recital is, first of all, the structure of the individual songs, a characteristic recognized by several reviewers, though referred to in different terms. "Narrative development" one reporter sees in them (Marcus 36), "songs that are short stories" (Mayer 35) and a historian of musicals adds, most relevantly, "a self contained one-act play" (Miletich 160). Often these one-act plays are acted out, quite dramatically, by the performers.

Second, given the frequent shifts of Brel's mood and themes, the creators of the musical, Blau and Shulman, have occasionally provided transitions. After a melancholic song, "Alone," describing how betrayal creates loneliness, there is a brief dialogue between the performers, written by Blau and Shulman.

MAN #1 (Spoken) You are bitter!

GIRLS #1 & 2 (Spoken) Bitter, bitter, bitter!

MAN #2 (Spoken) Bitter! It's not me. It's Brel. But he says that he writes the songs that he does because he's in rapport with the world, as it is (Blau and Shuman 4).

The directors of touring companies have enlarged upon these transitions. According to the reviews and my own observations these interstices have also taken the form of interpretive dances or addresses to the audience and, in spectacular fashion at a recent (2002) Detroit performance at the JET Theatre by backdrops, slides, and a picture of the long-deceased Jacques Brel. One of the women performers "holds hands" with him as a sign of silent approval.

Elsewhere Blau admits that Schulman and he devoted considerable attention to the arrangement of the programs, by which he

means the sequencing of the songs: “[. . .] We knew what we wanted: to order the songs and their interpretations in such a way as to create the theatre experience as opposed to the concert or variety experience” (Blau 61). Blau does not elaborate on the criteria for sequencing, but they can easily be inferred from the theater program. The two songs that frame the presentation form the beginning and the end of a long journey. “Marathon” provides a near endless catalogue of human folly during the twentieth century, from World War I to Viet Nam. (In fact one reference work views *Jacques Brel*, by implication, as an anti-war protest piece) (Suskin 399). Other human aberrations, or crimes, such as Stalinism, the injustice of the Sacco-Vanzetti trial and, the Holocaust are also pilloried.⁸ But the show concludes with a sliver of hope with the line: “If we only had love [. . .].” One is reminded of Erich Kästner’s famous poem, “Trostlied im Konjunktiv” (Kästner 170).

But the artful structuring of the program does not cease with the framing numbers. In a concert recital, in a review or in a cabaret, songs are frequently “bundled.” Arias or songs of love, and happy or tragic songs follow one another or, at most, the breaking of a mood is rare. But in *Jacques Brel* it is the rule. The haunting song “My Death” (“My death waits like an old roué”) is immediately followed by the parodic feminist ditty “Girls and Dogs” (11). Or, in reverse, the lambasting of the middle class, in a song entitled “The middle class are just like pigs,” gives way (after a brief admonition not to pretend feelings of love) to one of the climatic songs of the show, the love song, “My love you’re not alone.” We, the spectators, are forced to constantly adjust to the change of masks, which – be they comic, tragic or in between – have come to symbolize drama and theatre. For me the performances of Jacques Brel resemble emotional roller coasters.

Fourthly Jacques Brel’s lyrics can be read as fragmentary autobiography, which are intensified through the power of his melodies. Of course when Brel himself presented them in his own marathon runs through the bistros and concert halls of France, Belgium, London and New York the impression that he was the protagonist of his own lyrics took on an added dimension. But no matter, the reviewers realized that the four performers, featured in the staging of his songs, took on his persona. “Suffice [it] to say,” wrote one Toronto reviewer, “that they [the performers] were able to *be* Brel rather than four young soloists” (Hicklin 39).

In short the autobiographical elements are present and so palpable that Blau and Shulman, working on the show for several years, felt compelled to hint at them. "Sometimes, involved with his work, it seems suddenly that I know him completely; everything he is; all of his life and all of his secrets. After all, all of it is in his songs" (Blau 30). Elsewhere Blau adds, "But what he feels and believes is to be found in his songs. Not the total Brel, but as much of him as he can offer – the essential Brel" (Blau 40). Brel inadvertently reified Blau's conclusion. During a 1967 press conference in New York he said: "There are people as unhappy and bored as I sometimes am [. . .]. They feel a little better that somebody knows and tells them that he knows" (Stasio 59). Supported by Blau's insights and Brel's self-assessment one can reasonably to assume that the abused young army recruit in the song "Next" and the dreamer of future fame in "Jackie" (nomen est omen) come close to being Brelian self-portrayals. These autobiographical elements, enfolded into the songs, add to the drama of the songs – and of the show.

As a recent history of the musical theatre puts it: "In a sense, the show is more character study than anything else [. . .]" (Miller 111). Precisely that aspect of the new type of revue found a great many followers. One revue, *Ain't Misbehavin'* (1978) tells of the life and times of Fats Waller; *Sophisticated Lady* (1981) does as much for Duke Ellington, *Perfectly Frank* (1980) becomes the life story of Frank Lesser. The songs accompany the life and times of the protagonists. But while watching the opening of *LoveMusik*, a more recent example, which chronicles the adventures of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya, I realized that the songs appeared no longer in chronological order. That rather confusing arrangement may have contributed to the foreshortened run of the show.

Finally *Jacques Brel* works as drama because it leans on a new form of theater; it applied the dramatic theory of Brecht-Weill into the staging of a musical revue. By the time *Jacques Brel* opened, American theater devotees and reviewers had come to accept Brecht's innovative type of theater. They came to recognize it in *Jacques Brel*. Ellie Stone, the wife of Eric Blau, the long-time star-of-the-show and its occasional director found Brechtian "alienation" in Brel's lyrics (Schaeffer 39), but critics also spotted the connection. The reviewer of *Newsday*, covering the opening night performance – or rather trying to bury it – unearthed nonetheless the connection to Brecht: "And so what it comes down to, shades, but pale

shades of Brecht” (Tallmer 27). A biographical reference work, speaking of Brel’s recording, found in it the raucous Brechtian intensity (Stasio 58). As the show moved across the country, a Florida reporter noted the indebtedness to the *Three Penny Opera*. “The arrow-shot of lyrics, melding poetry and sheer power, frequently evokes the deadly volley of Kurt Weill’s *Three Penny Opera*. Passing from the touching to the sardonic, the audience may painfully ponder life and love” (Hern 20).

The same critic implicitly also evokes Brecht and Weill when he analyzes Brel’s predilection for social protest and his intolerance of people’s passivity in the face of injustice: “He pummels the audience to take position.” (Hern 20) That is very Brechtian, of course.

As late as 2005 a newsletter from British Columbia quotes, approvingly, an earlier observation on the Brel-Brecht-Weill connection:

Brimming with flair, attitude and European sophistication, these rich compositions bring to mind the groundbreaking work of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht, creating a universe all their own that consistently startles with its daring, candor and insight. The sheer musical poetry of each song supports many layers of interpretation, giving the show a new and unexpected meaning with every new cast and production team that takes it on.⁹

Some reviewers noted another startling parallel, one that I had also observed during the first month of the revue’s run: that Brel, like Weill, had frequently scored lyrics against the grain: “There are fast, funny songs too, “reported the *Village Voice*,“ with a bouncy music hall gaiety, that is deftly and pointedly belied by the words” (Novick 18).

Hence, clearly, some of the experts agree that Blau’s and Shuman’s creation stood on the shoulders of Weill and Brecht. That is, of course, not a negative assessment, especially if such an assessment lifts the revue to dizzying heights through a flattering comparison:

Audiences that witness [... Elly Stone’s] tours de force know what it must have been like in the ‘30’s, when that young Lotte Lenya sang the works of Brecht and Weill and cabaret fused with art. The resemblance to Brecht and Weill does not end with Elly. The elusive melodies seem, at first, to be more cloaks for Brel’s verse. But they bear constant repetition [...]. As for his lyrics, the terse, iron-clad couplets recognize revelations beyond politics and fashion; they know that every man is an expatriate from youth (Stasio 58).

But now comes the ironic turn-about. Weill and Brecht never collaborated or worked singly on a revue. At a stretch, Weill's *Lunchtime Follies*, text by Maxwell Anderson, could be so defined.¹⁰ Yet after Weill and Brecht's death scores of adapters tried their hand at molding their songs into show-length revues. With *Jacques Brel* now supplying a ready-made model, these new adapters drew their inspiration from the French-American team work as well. The archive of the Kurt-Weill Foundation for Music houses material, which documents the appearance of more than a dozen of these additional attempts to pour old wine into new bottles. Some were successful, such as *From Berlin to Broadway* (Wilton 11) or the prestigious, intimate late-late show with Bebe Neuwirth, entitled *Here Lies Jenny* (Ryzik 7); others, such as *Kurt Weill Cabaret* turned out dismal. "There is a disjointed, almost frantic air to many of the sketches, as if the performers are trying very hard to squeeze effective results out of intransigent material," wrote and spoke a disconcerted critic for a St. Louis university radio station.¹¹

But to show how unusual theater can spawn still more unusual theater, a show called *Songplay* by Jonathan Eaton can serve as prime example.¹² The title itself points to the innovation. It is not, *mutatis mutandis*, a biography of Kurt Weill; it is not held together by an interlocutor, though the device of a transitional, functional dance is retained. It is an exile drama, six characters in search of his or her individual utopia. It is held together as well by the theme song "Youkali," Weill's vision of a never-neverland. By subtly and unspokenly conjuring up the exile Kurt Weill, it inserts part of the autobiography of the composer via a back door.

An introduction to the script summarizes the plot:

The story is driven by the characters that the songs imply, and the sequence in which the songs are arranged. The journeyers are the disinherited of several lands: four men and two women, all itinerants, are gradually thrown together while waiting to undertake a journey by ship to Youkali. They meet in a disused dockside bar that serves as a waiting room. As they wait, relationships form, shift, burst apart, and ignite. The characters tell of their experience in song: some have been traveling to escape, fleeing persecution or failed dreams; all travel in search of an ideal, a fair society, wealth, love, the good life, a redeeming experience.

Their attitudes to the search and to each other are brought into focus by three crises and a revelation (Eaton [iii]).

Hence we have here the variation on a theme; the originator, Jonathan Eaton, has added a *raison d'être* for the six characters, played by singing actors, to have assembled on stage. But the structured revue character remains; there is a modicum of dialogue. The 36 songs, assembled from the European and American shows of Weill must carry the message and plot. Eaton has retained the clash of contrasts. When the German baritone provokes the Jewish refugee with a raucous rendering of Weill's "Rhineland Song," the Jew touchingly counters with a soft liturgical song by Weill.

The action is only partially scripted. As in *Jacques Brel* it leaves much to the director and the performers. And as in Blau and Shulman's structured recital, a song, "Youkali," serves as the framing of the play. In addition, the unmediated contrast between the sequential songs lends drama to the action. Finally, the ancestry of Brecht is equally in evidence. In the production I attended in Cincinnati, Brecht's epic theater celebrated a sort resurrection, with situations depicted that antedate the time of the drama; characters also recite songs or dialogue, which commemorate events or experiences that precede the action of the revue. For example Lilly, an abused adventuress, at one point "remains caught up in her recollections," as the script dictates (10). Brecht would have approved.

Like Blau, Jonathan Eaton suffuses the work with his point of view. What he attributes to Weill also motivates him: "Weill has a point of view – he depicts the little guy making headway in the world, but there are also political threads to it" (Carpenter 11). And when Eaton, by using "Youkali," a utopian song, as theme, comes close to Blau and Brel's "If we only had love," the conclusion to *Jacques Brel*.

In short the structured revue is alive and well and living all over, including in the many Kurt Weill revues, who had been one of Brel's and Blau's spiritual progenitors and posthumously supplied the songs for *Songplay*.

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Notes :

- ¹ Cet article a été initialement publié dans la revue *CDE* (Contemporary Drama in English - Volume 15, Martin Middeke & Paul Schnierer, eds., pp 139-151) de nos amis du RADAC allemand qui nous ont aimablement permis cette reprise proposée par Guy Stern. Le thème et le sous-genre abordés justifiaient pleinement aux yeux de Claude Coulon et aux miens la reproduction de l'article qui répond au thème de notre projet pour un public scientifique différent.
- ² Cf. Miller: "And though the revue had little influence on musical theatre as a dramatic art form, it gave first opportunities and paychecks to some of the men who would go on to polish the first generation of real American musical theatre [...]" (Miller 18).
- ³ Flinn 116.
- ⁴ Cf. Kantor.
- ⁵ Cf. Herz: "Erscheinungen des Musiktheaters, die dem Musical entsprechen, gibt es seit 400 Jahren – natürlich jeweils in den Formen und aus dem Geiste ihrer Zeit. Was Not tut, sind terminologische Klärung und Einordnung zahlreicher Erscheinungen, die sich verbergen unter dem Namen anderer Gattungen" (Herz 42).
- ⁶ *Long Island Network Review*. By Richard J. Scholem. WSGM Radio, Huntington, NY. 22 Jan. 1968
- ⁷ *Drama Review: Jacques Brel is Alive – Theater of the Living Arts*. By Bob Nelson. Westinghouse Broadcasting Company Inc. KYW Radio, Philadelphia. 29 Oct.-30 Oct. 1968.
- ⁸ The song titles in "The Table of Contents" frequently take liberties with the original titles bestowed by Jacques Brel: they often reveal the intent of the song, such as "Funeral Tango" and "Middle Class."
- ⁹ The Guide to Musical Theatre. 4 Sept. 2007
<http://www.nodanw.com/shows_j/jacques_brel.htm>
- ¹⁰ Cf. Kowalke 76-81.
- ¹¹ *Theater Project Company: Kurt Weill Cabaret*. By Robert Boyd. KWMU-FM, St. Louis. 18 Jan. 1991
- ¹² *Songplay* opened in St. Louis on September 26, 1994 at the Playhouse in the Park and ran until October 20, 1994. The script was never published, but the complete book is housed at the archive of the Kurt Weill Foundation, New York.