



SIR TIM RICE interviewed by Daniel Hahn

DH: Hallo. My name is Daniel Hahn and I'm very pleased to be in conversation today with Sir Tim Rice, who is a lyricist, who has worked on (just to name the obvious) *Joseph, Jesus Christ Superstar, Evita, Chess, Lion King* and many other things we are going to talk about. He is one of only about a dozen people who is an EGOT winner (Emmy, Grammy, Oscar and Tony), which is a rare honour. He's also been briefly a chat show host, worked with publishers, and many other things. Since 2017 he's been the President of The London Library, which is one of the reasons we are having this conversation today. The London Library was supposed to be having a literature festival on the 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> of May; we're pretending to be at The London Library for the purposes of this conversation. Just briefly, for anyone who doesn't know, The London Library is one of the world's great literary institutions; it's been a centre for learning, ideas and creativity for about 175 years. Charles Dickens was a founder member, Virginia Woolf was a life member, Kubrick researched his films there; Bram Stoker wrote *Dracula* using the books they still have on their shelves. I'll be talking to Tim, at some point in the conversation, about his relationship with the library. I think it's worth saying that one of the things that makes the library special is an extraordinary collection of over a million books dating from 1700 to the present, which are still all on loan to members, I gather, during the lockdown when the staff are very kindly posting free of charge books out to their members. Tim, I want to start by asking you something about the time before you did all these great things you've done, about your childhood and starting out. I wonder whether you were one of those bookish, theatre-ish children; who we look at and go well, it's obvious this is what he's going to end up doing; were you one of those?

TR: I was not interested in theatre particularly. I did read a lot of books. I read quite a bit of fiction, I suppose, when I was a kid, but I probably didn't read any fiction really thoroughly in my teenage years at all. I would read a lot of newspapers; I read a lot of sporting books; obviously read my schoolbooks; but I was never particularly bookish or theatrical in my younger days, not really. I always wanted to write things. I used to write sort of funny poems and things at school, this that and the other, but I was more interested in pop music by the time I got to be fifteen or sixteen.

DH: And so what was it, what was the music that you were brought up on, what was the music of your teens?



TR: Well it was rock and roll: Elvis; Everly Brothers; Chuck Berry; and then the British equivalents – Tommy Steele; Cliff Richard; The Shadows; Billy Fury; Marty Wilde. It's all that pre-Beatles stuff, which sometimes (obviously not Elvis or the American ones) are looked down upon these days. But that's very wrong in my view. I think they were operating in a totally different world from that which The Beatles and Stones operated in a few years later. The Beatles and Stones were about the same age as Cliff and The Shadows, for example, and got going when they were very young: sixteen, seventeen. It was a very interesting period of British popular music, which I think deserves more recognition now, but it's been understandably obscured by the brilliance, genius and worldwide domination of the British acts of the mid-1960's onwards.

DH: Your own song writing career: we talk a lot about your meeting with Andrew Lloyd Webber at the beginning of it; am I right in understanding that you had a song recorded before that?

TR: I did. I wouldn't say it was a milestone in recording history. I'd written some songs, really in a rather vain attempt to get my voice heard and, possibly, get a record deal because a lot of people from my background and age all seemed to be making records. This is Beatles and Stones time, mid 1960's. I was a law student and not doing very well at it. In my spare time I sang with one or two pop groups at dances and things, and I thought it might be fun to make an audition tape of my voice. I didn't want to sing anyone else's songs because I would then be unfavourably compared to the people who originated those songs. I was not as good as Tom Jones or Mick Jagger or anybody like that. So I wrote my own songs and would therefore automatically be the best interpreter ever of those songs. The tape was to sell my voice, but my voice cut no ice with anybody I sent it to. One record company said they liked the songs, one in particular, and they would send it off to a pop group. Consequently I got one of my songs recorded. It wasn't a hit, but it was quite something to have my name on a label, on a finished, commercially released 45rpm single. That meant you were on the very bottom rung of the ladder, but you were on the ladder. Nowadays anybody can make an album or a CD, download it or whatever. There's no sort of quality control, in the sense that back in the mid-60's (in fact right the way through probably till about the 80's) if you wanted to make a recording, you probably didn't have a record pressing plant in your front room. You had to have someone who liked it enough to invest in it, even if it was just putting it out as a single. So by having one song on a record, and my name on the label, that gave me a little bit of kudos. The record was a flop . . . (laughs) . . . and I've not really written very many tunes since. I did write the tune of that song, and one or two others, but my tunes always seem to be rather country and western type things. They weren't terrible but they weren't that original.



DH: Having started, you said, wanting to get your voice heard, wanting to get discovered and listened to as a singer - and having had that first song recorded by someone else - did you then see writing as the thing rather than performing, or did you resist that for a bit?

TR: I don't think I resisted it, nor did I think, wow, I'm going to be a song writer. I just thought, I wonder where this will lead? I hawked my copy of the single by *The Night Shift* . . . I think I probably sunk their careers . . . everywhere I went, to try and impress people. I was nineteen, I had lots of ideas. I went to a book publisher with an idea for a book on The Charts, which hadn't been done at that point. The publisher didn't like that, but he heard my song and was quite impressed by the fact that I had a record out. He didn't like it particularly, but he said, I know a young man who's also trying to make it as a songwriter, (which I wasn't really trying to do to be honest, but I didn't tell him that) and maybe you should meet him. And that was Andrew. So that was good fortune. When I met Andrew, it was clear that he had positive ambitions. He wanted to write for the theatre, musical theatre, whereas everybody else in 1965's Britain wanted to be Mick Jagger, or John Lennon, or Paul McCartney, or The Kinks or The Animals. All these acts were doing so well, and they were all pop and rock or blues. To want to be Lionel Bart or Richard Rodgers was a bit weird at that point but that's what Andrew wanted. Theatre lyrics were much more up my alley really, than writing rock and roll lyrics. So I said, 'Yeah, I'm interested in the theatre,' which was not quite true. But I did know a lot of the scores from great musicals. My parents had a very good collection of albums: all the Rodgers and Hammerstein stuff; *My Fair Lady*; *West Side Story*; all those sorts of things so I knew the songs pretty well . . . Gilbert and Sullivan . . . and I was always a fan of words as much as the music. I never had any great desire to see the shows, funnily enough, I just loved the scores. So I was able to say to Andrew that I did know a fair amount of musical theatre stuff. Lionel Bart was probably the king of British musicals at the time. I knew Lionel Bart through Tommy Steele. Lionel Bart wrote a lot of pop hits as well, so I was aware of Bart being a big success both in the pop charts and in the conventional West End theatre.

DH: The collaboration with Andrew Lloyd Webber: *Joseph* was the first show people know about. It wasn't the first show you wrote together; I believe.

TR: We wrote a show called *The Likes of Us*. Andrew was already working on it when we met in 1965. It was a musical based on the life of Doctor Barnado, the Victorian philanthropist who founded Doctor Barnado's Homes. Andrew had been working on this musical with a chap he was at school with, who, very sensibly decided he wanted to be a doctor instead. Andrew had the storyline and the tunes; he wanted someone to write new words so I kind of auditioned. I said, 'Oh yeah, it sounds a great idea!' In fact it wasn't a



great idea, it was a tolerable idea, but it was unoriginal. I didn't know that, at least I didn't care even if I did know it. I wrote some words to Andrew's tunes, which I thought were really good. I was really impressed by how good his tunes were, and he was only seventeen. We wrote this show called *The Likes of Us*. it was never going to be good enough, looking back on it with hindsight. It was never going to be good enough to get on. But it showed that we could work together and there were some good things in it, mainly the music; the music was better than the words; but there were some good words in there, the funny ones were quite good. It showed us that we could work together as a team. We just needed to find the perfect vehicle, which we found by accident when a teacher at Andrew's brother's school said that he liked the demo record we'd made of *The Likes of Us*. We had made a proper demo disc, which we'd paid for, illustrating the songs and the story. That wasn't bad. This schoolmaster said, 'Well, why don't you write something whilst you're waiting to go to Broadway and the West End?' -which we were told by various agents that that would happen - 'Why don't you write something for my kids?' And that was a bit of a come down. I think by the time of 1967 we began to think *The Likes of Us* is not going to happen so we were glad to write anything that would get our work heard. By working for a school, with no thoughts of the West End, no dreams of Broadway, or even making a record, we were able to write something purely to entertain the children. That's where I found a bit of a style of my own; Andrew certainly did; and we came up with *Joseph*, which the kids just loved! They didn't care that it was only just for them and that it wasn't part of a big show. The parents loved it as well; it gradually grew; it took a long time. *The Likes of Us* has eventually been recorded (I think it was about 2005). We decided, Andrew and I, to make a record of it and perform it at his private festival, in the grounds of his house, because there was my stuff on it. It was never going to be a show. It has been done, weirdly, once or twice now. But anyone interested in what we got up to really should listen to that album, because it shows us like The Beatles in Hamburg (not that I'm trying to compare us with The Beatles). It's that sort of, you know, beginning of a partnership.

DH: And can you tell one of the things that you learned from that? I mean, it sounds like *Joseph* . . . the freedom of working with others' expectations allowed you to discover things, discover your own voices, which you learned I presume from that first experience?

TR: Yes, I think what we learned, or what I learned, certainly from the two shows *The Likes Of Us* and *Joseph*, which eventually became successful, was that if you want to get going in the musical theatre world, if you can be funny straight off you've got more chance of people listening to you when you're unknown, however brilliant your angst is and pouring out your heart in deep, serious musicals. I don't think people will listen beyond the first song. They'll think well this is okay. Even something like *Les Mis'* might not have got on immediately if it hadn't had some sort of track record and producers behind it. And that's a



brilliant show. It's good to start by launching something funny, something short, and get it on somewhere because producers and agents don't really listen to CD's, tapes, or whatever you have these days, streaming. They want to see something live. With *Joseph* we did all that, unintentionally. It was amusing, it was comparatively cheap to do, we got it on, and the audience loved it. That was the answer.

DH: Having said that though, it's interesting what came next: *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which was the first big sort of commercial success. It became a commercial success as an album, as a big kind of rock album before being on stage. Did that change the way you wrote that show, the fact that it's first encounter was not a stage show?

TR: Yeah. We wrote it after the not financial but critical success of *Joseph*. It was slowly being done in schools but, even then, we didn't think it was ever going to be anything more than a possible staple for school concerts. What *Joseph* did for us, above all, was to get us an agent and a manager and a proper team who knew what they were doing. The first thing we did under this management operation meant that they paid us just to exist. I was able to give up my job. I was then working with Norrie Paramor, the very distinguished record producer, as his P.A. By 1969 I was earning tolerable money, something like £1200 a year at Norrie's, and I was a bit concerned when we were offered this management deal. But David Land and his partner said they would give us £1500 a year each, and they would take a commission of anything we did if it made any money. It was a tricky decision because I thought it was a bit of a leap in the dark. I was twenty-two or something and I thought, you know, I'm getting on a bit now and I've got to be careful here. But that really gave us the chance to write something big and not worry about having to earn anything. We wrote *Superstar*, and we had a management team who then tried to get this piece put on stage, but nobody wanted to know about it. The Cameron Mackintosh's of the day thought that it was a rotten idea. The only person who really liked it was a record company chief called Brian Brolly (MCA records, who were a small company in England but had a big company worldwide, particularly in America). Brian said, well MCA could do the show down the line and it could be a film or whatever, but we've got to do a record first. That's all we'll let you do to see if it's got any appeal. And, of course, the record turned out to be a massive great big hit, particularly in America. It did change the way the piece was conceived. We hadn't, at that point, written any dialogue but we might well have done. We assumed, if it had been a show, we would have put dialogue in. We had to make it shorter. We were able to think of it in terms of records, that sort of music i.e. rock music, progressive rock. That was the time, the end of the 1960's, 1969/70, when albums were becoming the main commercial part of record buying; even though we did get one or two hit singles from it. *Superstar* was like *Tommy* just before it. It was very much what the young trendies, intellectuals and all that, were actually after and *Superstar* broke through with them; brilliant packaging, brilliant



marketing and all that in America; big album market. Then it caught on, on record, with the adults so it was a doubly big hit. Consequently after about six months of being one of the biggest selling records ever in America, we had lots of theatrical producers saying I want to do this as a show – all the guys that hadn't showed any interest before. So it was that way round. We found that, almost by mistake, we'd hit on a way of promoting a show. So when it got to *Evita*, we did it the same way, but deliberately made the album first.

DH: You're still at this point, when *Superstar* becomes such a hit, you and Andrew were still in your early, mid-twenties. How did success on that scale, that young, suit you?

TR: Oh very well. I liked it . . . (laughs) . . . better than failure. Well, it obviously changes your life, in a sense that I could afford to buy a house, nothing ludicrously extravagant. I never dreamt I'd be able to ever buy my own property, or at least not until I was about forty and, you know, one lived very well. An awful lot of the things that we did were paid for by other people, like travel, hotels, and this that and the other, record company promotions. 1971 was the year that the album was number one, and that was the year we opened on Broadway, at the very end of the year. In that year I kind of thought, well this is probably the only good year we're going to have. It never crossed my mind that I would make a career out of it so one has to make the most of it, both in having a nice time and seeing a bit of the world and also trying to hang on to some of the money we were going to make. Of course the tax rates in England, where we were resident, went up to 83-98% on unearned income. It was bonkers. Obviously, despite all that, we were able to hang on to something of it. It clearly changed one's life completely. Had we not maintained success, I suppose one would have gone back to a sort of fairly normal existence. But I like to think that I'd got a fairly normal existence anyway. Who knows. Who is normal?

DH: You mentioned that for *Evita*, the next big show, that the process was similar, that you started with the album before the stage show. Say something about the idea for that show. It's an unlikely subject for a show. What made you think that that was a good idea?

TR: Well I suppose the short answer is I was very interested in the story, even though it had nothing to do with my country. It was somebody that was not that well known in England, if at all. I was aware of Eva Peron when I was a stamp collector at school, when I was very young, aged nine, ten, eleven. Eva Peron was on the Argentina stamps. I was always intrigued by the fact that these stamps had this interesting looking lady on them, whereas very few other countries ever had, apart from the Queen's head on Commonwealth and British stamps. There were very few women. I suppose there was the French one, the Marseillaise or whatever it was. Basically the stamps stood out and I was intrigued by Eva Peron when I was nine, ten, eleven. I forgot all about her until I heard a



radio programme in 1973, by chance, and thought ahh, yes, I used to know a little bit about her. At the time we were looking for a follow up, or I was. We'd first thought of doing a follow up to *Superstar*, completely changing tack and doing a musical on *Jeeves*. I was pretty keen to begin with and then the more I worked on it the more I found that writing lyrics up against the humour of P.G.Wodehouse - who obviously is one of the greatest writers and funniest writers of all time - I felt that I wasn't really doing Wodehouse or myself any favours. I decided after about six months or maybe a bit more, working on *Jeeves* with Andrew, that it was probably the wrong project for us. But Andrew wanted to go on with it, and indeed he did. He got in Alan Ayckbourn and I thought oh-oh, I've obviously thrown away a huge hit here. But it ended up a bit of a mess, I'm afraid, the show. It wasn't very good. Not that the songs weren't good, the music was certainly good. It was a bit of a mess. By this time I'd got the idea for doing *Evita* and I thought that was a much more interesting concept for a show, even though nobody had really heard of her in the UK. And also it was something that was in our style, if we had one. It was a natural follow up to *Superstar*, I think, by deliberately trying to go back to a style that wasn't really ours. I mean *Jeeves*, even if it had been brilliant, would have been something that could have been written in 1940. And I think, whatever you think of *Superstar*, it could really only have been written in 1969 or 1970. It was of its time. And, if I may be so bold, it's good enough to have survived into other eras. Really, looking back on it, I'm glad I didn't stick with *Jeeves*, not only because it flopped, and it would have flopped if I'd been with it. It was just that it wasn't really different, it wasn't doing anything new. It doesn't mean to say it wasn't good, and I know Andrew's revived it once or twice and it's always gone down fairly well, but it's really just the wrong direction I thought we were going in. And when *Jeeves* didn't do very well, Andrew said, well, we'd better do this bonkers idea about Eva Peron of yours. He wrote the most wonderful score. It was absolutely brilliant. I think he was inspired by the story, and that was very encouraging. I thought, well if he's inspired by the story, and he didn't know anything about it before, then I think a lot of other people could be. And it is a great story. When we wrote it, Eva had only been dead for twenty, twenty-five years. She could have easily been alive. She could have turned up for the opening night she would have only been sixty. She would have been great if she'd been there. I think she would have to write the show . . . (laughs).

DH: Tell us about that opening night. Can you describe that experience? You'd had this idea, a lot of work goes into it, a lot of development in recording the album. What's it like standing at the back of the house or sitting in the front row, whatever your choice is?

TR: Well I think by the time you get to the opening night, you've usually got a pretty good idea whether the show's going to work or not. Depending on that is where you sit really. If you think it's going to a bit dodgy, or dicky, you might stay at the back and make a



dash for it before the curtain comes down. But I think, with *Evita*, we knew it was going to go well because the album had been a big success, which helped. There'd been enormous publicity for the show, which can help but sometimes doesn't. The first preview (we'd had about ten or twelve previews before the opening night; that first preview wasn't a completely full house) was about 80-85% and that went down so well. The people there knew nothing about Eva Peron, beyond what they might have picked up from the album. It was just a fantastic success. The company and everybody was very buoyed by that. The problem we then had, was how can we sustain this enthusiasm through two weeks of previews without getting blasé or tired or over-confident or whatever? But we managed it and the opening night was definitely, I think, the best opening night I've been to; the opening of *Evita* in London, it was terrific. I don't like opening nights very much. I don't even like my own normally, but I did enjoy that one.

DH: This is what we call a leading question: what did the critics say; how universally was this loved by the critics?

TR: The critics weren't bad. They were very rude in New York, but in London the critics weren't too bad. They tended to go for Hal Prince because he was an established great director, no question, and he did a wonderful job; and they went for Elaine because they were discovering her; she was brilliant, she was outstanding, a lot of pressure on her. Andrew and I, you know, we got reasonable reviews. The view was, these two guys they quite lucky really, they got good people around them, they got a bit of a commercial flair. I don't think we really got the best of the reviews. There were some terrible ones as well: Bernard Levin, who is a writer I always admired, he slaughtered it. He said it was one of the worst evenings he'd ever had in or out of the theatre. But, as he'd also written a piece sometime before slagging off The Beatles, I thought well maybe he's not the market we're aiming for. Then, when we got to America, it got slaughtered again by almost everybody. All the critics . . . it was the politics . . . they seemed to think we were trying to, I don't know, convert America to Fascism or something. It was insane. The show wasn't quite as good in America as it was in London, but it was still a big hit. We won Tonys and all that stuff, so it didn't really matter what the reviews were like. Several other shows that had been big hits didn't always get great reviews. I think that the idea there was a butcher of Broadway, or that The New York Times controlled what happened on Broadway, I don't think is all that true. It helps if they're on your side but it's the public . . . people go to shows . . . perhaps the first two or three months there might be a crowd who understands or reads the critics, but even then, it wouldn't be all the people in the theatre. I think you or I would go to a show if your mate says you must go, it's great or, alternatively, if he says oh no, don't bother with that, it's awful. But if you read that with a critic, I don't think that makes an enormous amount of difference. You'd say, oh he didn't like it, or he did. It's word of mouth



that is the key thing. I think, clearly, in New York people were saying, despite what the critics said, oh it's a good show, you really should go. It was. It was a great show.

DH: You said that the critics are not going to be the thing that makes or breaks a show, which I completely I agree with. But it does often happen that, for a writer, it's a difficult moment, I think.

TR: Well, obviously, if you get someone writing in a big newspaper, you know, T Rice is devoid of all talent . . . you know, this that and the other, it doesn't make your day. But, you know, a few years down the line you can't remember the name of the critic so . . . (laughs). If the show lasts that's the way to raise two fingers to critics. The critics, conversely, in both London and New York, particularly in New York, they are always raving about stuff which is pretty esoteric. It may be good, some of it, but they don't really know what's going to work. I've certainly never written with the aim of how can we make this commercial? I've written what I wanted to write. I mean many, many people said to me when we were doing both *Superstar* and *Evita*, well these are stupid ideas. If everybody says to you that's a great idea, then I think you should think, hello, if it's a great idea why has no-one else done it already? And I think the story of any musical is king. It's vitally important, the story. You've got to get people hooked pretty early on. It helps if they know the story already and like it, *vis Jesus*. With *Eva Peron* you had to tell them pretty quickly what was going to happen so that's why it was mainly in flashback. Andrew's wonderful symphonic stuff at the beginning (the funeral); and you know within ten minutes that somehow all this huge wailing and gnashing of teeth happened to a young girl; how? And that's interesting. You're telling them what you're going to do. You've got to do it well, of course. But story is king. I think that's why *Evita* really made it big because it's such a good story; and, of course, *Superstar*. The words and music have to be okay as well.

DH: Having said that, you can't always tell, and maybe you can never tell, what's going to be successful. One of the examples of that, I think, is possibly *Don't Cry for Me Argentina* - the song, which has been so successful since and yet seems incredibly unlikely as a success. It's not a lovely song, it's not beautiful and clever, it requires so much context to understand what's going on in that song, I think.

TR: Yeh, absolutely. I thought, well we both thought when it was recorded, that it wouldn't work except within the show, because it's not a pop single; it's six minutes long; it's got a strange lyric about a country that not many people in Britain relate to; not many people in Britain knew where it was; Julie Covington, who was a wonderful actress and talent, was not a record name, she wasn't an automatic seller of records; you couldn't really



dance to it. All these things were adding up to this is not a hit single. In fact, at one point, wrongly (my fault), we tried it with other titles to avoid calling it *Don't Cry for Me Argentina*. We wrote it with some other rather bad titles, which strangely just made the whole song die. I mean titles like *It's Only Your Lover Returning*. Awful! It taught us quite a lot. Before it was released on MCA records, the salesmen on the road, the dealers, the people in the company, they said, 'That's a single, it's a wonderful track.' They kind of picked it and said that's what should be the single. It took a bit of time to get it onto the radio, but once it was on the radio it kind of stood out from the pack. It happens with a record every so often. You get one particular record (it doesn't have to be a big ballad) that sometimes, like *A Whiter Shade of Pale* or *You've Lost That Loving Feeling*; you get these records which just don't quite sound like anything going on around them and yet they're contemporary. And *Argentina*, almost by mistake, did that and we were surprised. But of course it's become a huge hit, and sung by many, many people ever since. I remember one or two critics saying well it's just a string of clichés! Well that's what it was written to be: it's a speech in a musical, part of a story, it's not meant to be a stand-alone song. I was surprised that its stand-alone qualities made it very successful. It is meant to be a string of clichés. It's a politician saying something with rather nice words and a beautiful tune and not really saying anything. It's all rather vague. It's like what most politicians do. The way you say it is more important than what you say.

DH: But you hear it covered and it sounds like a love song or something.

TR: Yeh.

DH: And it's incredibly cynical . . . what you get on stage, at the end of it, you get the whole thing diffused. I think Che has a line immediately after the song –

TR: Yeah, that's how we finished it, you know. It was just this scene which would be interrupted, and she'd be insulted after it, not just wild applause. But when you take the Julie Covington record, or other people who have recorded it out of context, it's just a great record. Tom Jones did it, even. I mean . . . (laughs) . . . everybody's done it. It's extraordinary. Well, not everybody, but most people.

DH: I want to ask you a couple of things about *Chess*, Tim, which came soon after. You said, in an interview I heard recently, that *Chess* was a great album which has never quite worked on stage. Why do you think it hasn't quite worked on stage?

TR: Well it worked brilliantly when we toured it as a concert, just before the record came out. It is a great record, he said immodestly. Benny and Bjorn: fantastic in the studio,



melodically, lyrically and production wise. But I think we made it too complicated. I regret saying on the record, when it was released, *Chess* is a work in progress. It wasn't, it was finished, and we didn't know that, or I didn't realise that. It's all there on the record. Every director who got his hands on it, because it wasn't established that there was a final definitive version of the show, every director or producer had his own thoughts, which may or may not have been good. And the show never really worked, except in concert. It worked in concert superbly over the years, when you can imagine it all. But it is a complex story and if you can hear every word it's no more complicated than a lot of grand operas. I always wanted it to be done with subtitles or surtitles. Directors don't like that because they say, it's distracting for my brilliant direction . . . (sighs). We did it at The Albert Hall in 2008, directed by Hugh Wooldridge, and actually that went pretty well. We had sound problems on one night, which didn't help, but there's a very good DVD of that out. I always think that version works pretty well. But the original album is just wonderful. It just moves along. It's got a lot of great tunes in it as well. If every show one ever wrote was as successful on stage as *Chess*, it would still be a big hit. It did quite well in London, apart from a spectacular failing on Broadway where everything went wrong. It's been performed all over the world and it's probably on somewhere right now. Actually not on right now, of course! But it's always being done somewhere.

DH: The job of a lyric writer, obviously, is writing for characters. You're not writing sort of abstractly as it were. I wondered though if you write for actors, for voices, because *Chess* the recording had Elaine Page, it had Murray Head, both of whom you'd worked a lot with before. And I wondered if that's something that happened, that you have a voice, you have an actor in mind when you are writing and it's not just –

TR: No, I don't think you necessarily have an actor or actress in mind. That might restrict what you write; maybe not for the words person but certainly for the music. I think your first priority has to be writing it and then see who can sing it. But someone like Elaine or Murray, they were so good. I was pretty confident that this work would be well within their capabilities. There are great singers around whom *Chess* would not have suited but again it's always good to work with people that you know. Had, heaven forbid, something not worked then we would have said, 'Terribly sorry old boy, or old girl, gotta get somebody else in.' One of the pluses of doing an album first, is that you can, if you have to, (and thank God we haven't had to do this), erase somebody from the show comparatively easily, or from the record. Difficult to do on stage. If you cast somebody wrongly on stage it's a bit of a public problem, if you have to ask them to leave. Again, we haven't had to do that, as far as I'm aware.



DH: One of the things you said about the writing of *Chess* (I think this was in your Desert island Discs some years ago), you talk about the writing being closer to your experiences than some of the other things you've written.

TR: Yeh.

DH: And I wonder whether that makes it easier or harder . . . those connections?

TR: I don't think it makes it easier or harder. Sheridan Morley, I think it was, said to me 'You are making it harder if it's an original story because you've got one more thing to do.' Up to that point I'd worked on stories that were basically there already and they were good stories: *Joseph*, *Evita*, *Superstar* and all that. *Chess*, although it was based in part on this Fischer v Spassky chess match, was a tale of how chess got involved with politics in the cold war; and I knew from my studies and research into the chess world that there were a lot of emotional problems with chess players, wives, girlfriends, and this, that and the other. I think it's a very fertile landscape for a good musical. On the other hand, it is difficult writing something where the story could go any way. It's up to you to write it. With *Superstar* no director could say, I think he should get off at the end; or with *Evita*, let's have her live and become a grand old woman. You can't do that. With *Chess*, everybody seemed to have a different idea as to how it should end. That's why I wished we'd just stuck to the record and said do this record; if you don't like the record don't do the show. But everybody has a view and that's difficult. *Chess* has suffered from that. For all its faults I think the story is pretty clear on the album.

DH: I want to ask you too about some of your Disney work, starting with *The Lion King*. What state was *The Lion King* in when you were approached; how far had they got with the planning . . .

TR: *Lion King* hardly existed when I turned up. I was hanging around the Disney studios, because at that time they were possibly going to do a film of *Evita*. This was six or seven years before the movie eventually came out. I met one or two of the Disney heavyweights. Disney was going through a slightly quiet period then and the team of Michael Eisner and Jeffery Katzenberg were very keen to bring back its former glory, particularly in the animation field. I was a great fan of animation and of Disney in particular, from my childhood, and I was sort of dropping leaden hints that I wouldn't mind getting involved with a Disney cartoon. Although I was told they're not cartoons, they are Disney animated features. At that point they were launching *Little Mermaid*, which did very well. Alan Menken and Howard Ashman wrote the score. Howard Ashman: great lyricist. Then they did *Beauty and The Beast*, which was an even bigger success. They then decided, while Howard



and Alan were working on *Aladdin*, that they would get another one going immediately, because the animation team were back, and everything was buzzing. They asked me to come in on this idea they had for a film called *King of The Jungle*, which was daft really because there's no jungle in *The Lion King* . . . (laughs). Maybe it was going to be set somewhere else in Africa at that point, I don't know. Anyway it was just a director, who I think ultimately was moved along onto another project, an in-house Disney producer and the boss of the animated studios and, of course, Jeffery Katzenberg, one drawing of a lion and that was about it; and a vague story, which was going to be roughly the *Hamlet* story. And I was asked to come in as potential lyric writer, although there was no composer. So I was in really on day one virtually, which was great because I did see a film go from very early in the process all the way. Half-way through working on *The Lion King*, or maybe only a third of the way through, by which time Elton was on board at my suggestion, *Aladdin* was struck by tragedy when Howard Ashman, who'd been ill for a long time, died. They obviously thought, well this bloke Rice is here and he's on site and we need a couple of more lyrics in a hurry. So I was introduced to Alan Menken and quickly drafted into *Aladdin*. I knew *Aladdin* was happening, but I hadn't been involved with it at all; I was working on *Lion King*. And I met Alan, and we got on very well. We had to write a couple of songs and the first one we wrote was *A Whole New World*. I was very lucky there. Two or three of my songs went into the movie. The movie was an even bigger hit than *Beauty and The Beast*, and I won an Oscar with Alan for *A Whole New World*. So I came back to *The Lion King* as an Oscar winner, which was bit crazy because I was the most junior member of the team. But that kind of helped and I was able to see with *Aladdin* the later stages of the film, just as I'd learnt the early stages with *The Lion King*. Anyway *The Lion King* then continued on apace and did even better than *Aladdin*! I was lucky to be in on the graph with Disney when everything they touched turned to gold.

DH: When you were taking over from Alan Ashman for *Aladdin* and later writing more songs for *Beauty and The Beast*; how much do you have to keep in mind what Howard had been writing; how much are you mimicking another writer in that instance?

TR: Well I don't think, I mean critics may disagree, I don't think I was mimicking him at all. I was a great admirer of his, he was a great lyricist. When I knew I was going to be, as it were, stepping into his shoes I did a lot more research on him and listened to as much of his stuff as I could. We weren't that dissimilar in our styles. If you listen to *The Little Shop of Horrors* and *Joseph*, they're not a million miles apart. *Little Mermaid* and *Beauty*: all great stuff, which I admired. I think what Howard and I both did (obviously Howard never knew that I would be involved in his projects) was treat the story with respect and write in the style that the story needed. It would have been insane to have suddenly gone wacky, you know out and out rock and roll stuff with *Aladdin*. It was theatrical stuff; it was a great



Broadway score. That was what I would have written, I like to think, even if I'd come in on day one and Howard hadn't been involved. I think probably Disney thought this bloke Ricey is of that ilk; he's a theatrical writer more than a pop/rock writer; which I was. That's why they were quite happy to go with me. Obviously if I hadn't delivered a decent lyric, they would have turfed me off. But *A Whole New World* did pretty well, and they were stuck with me after that.

DH: With *Lion King* you mentioned you were working with Elton John; he was the composer. How much was the process of working with him different from your other composers?

TR: Well the obvious difference is that Elton writes the music after the lyrics. Every other composer I've worked with gives me the tune, and then I have to write the lyric to the tune, although there would have obviously been discussions before about the scene, who's singing it. I mean you've got to do that; I can't just write a blind lyric. I knew when I wrote *Don't Cry for Me Argentina* that Eva Peron was on a balcony, but so did Andrew. The first thing that happens with, say *Evita*, is the story, then the tune, then the lyrics. Occasionally I might come up with a title before there's a tune, or things get changed at the end. But with Elton he wants the lyric. He doesn't want to know anything else. All he wants to hear is the final lyric. Actually working on a film with a major star, who is always travelling around the world, and is not that available for regular meetings, that actually worked well because the lyric had to fit into the story. I would go to endless meetings. I was really part of the script. My lyrics had to be something that would fit the story at every point. I wrote a lot of lyrics that Elton never saw because quite often the storyline would change quite drastically. One would turn up for a meeting, Monday morning, and they'd say well actually we've decided to elbow this giraffe character or something; or the character who sings the lyric you wrote last week is now dead or isn't in the film. And with animation you can do that because the warthog doesn't have an agent! Whereas if you try to cut out somebody from a film who's a real-life flesh and blood actor, his agent's going to get a bit miffed if he gets booted out. So there were a lot of changes before Elton got a lyric. Even then there were several lyrics that Elton was sent, which he wrote tunes for and the songs didn't make it into the film. Either the tune or the melody wasn't quite right, or else the story changed again. It was a long process but, in the end, we did come up with some nice songs for the film, which just worked

DH: There must be quite a different challenge for you though, to be conceiving of a lyric without a tune, without a shape or a line to guide you ...



TR: Well it was different, but I quite enjoyed it. It gave me a new approach; I was quite free. I mean if you've got a tune and you've got to write something that fits nine syllables you can't do much about it. You can't say, well actually I'd rather I did it in eleven or in eight. Whereas you can, if you're writing the lyric on your own, you can write a verse in any structure you want. Once you've done the structure for verse one you've got to make verse two, three etc. the same structure. But if you're really struggling, you can always go back and tweak verse one, which you can't do if you've got a set tune. It was a different sort of challenge, sometimes a bit easier sometimes a bit harder. The danger of not having a tune is that you may be less concise than you would be if you had a tune. On the other hand you do have more freedom if there's no tune.

DH: Since the Disney movies you've done a number of shows. I'm thinking about something like *From Here to Eternity*, which was six or seven years ago. What are the things that make you say 'yes' to a project now?

TR: Oooh, I'm not sure. It's really a good story. I was very impressed with Stuart Brayson's music. He's the chap who wrote *From Here to Eternity*: his idea. I knew the storyline. I knew the film. He'd written an entire score, which he sent to me, words and music on *From Here to Eternity*. And I said have you got the rights to do this? He said, 'rights?' I said, yes, it's a famous book and a famous film but I'm not sure you can just do it without getting permission. So I decided to help him out because I'd been an admirer of his for many years. It took me quite a long time. It wasn't my number one project at that point. I was doing other things. We're talking about nearly twenty years ago when we first got going on it. I eventually got the rights for the book. I didn't need the film rights because the film was, in turn, something that had got the book rights from the James Jones estate, or from James Jones in the days of the film. When I finally got the rights, and we thought well now we can go ahead and do it, Stuart had other projects on the go. But, in the end, we got around to it. It got, strangely, quite good reviews in London but it didn't work. I can see some things that were wrong with it, but it won't go away. It's been done twice in America, out of town, way out of town, and it's always gone down very well. I think it's a show which has got more opportunity to succeed in America, being an American story, than it has here. There are producers who still say they'd like to do it and it may well happen. I would love it to happen for Stuart's sake. I'm not sure I would want to take on anything new now. I've got a few things bubbling away but I'm not going to do anything better than I've done already. So a bit discouraging really . . . (laughs).

DH: The big shows we've talked about do keep coming back . . .

TR: Yeh.



DH: ... and they keep being re-staged. One of the things I'm curious about is so many of them either have new productions, or they have a new medium, a stage show becomes a film, something becomes animated and it goes onto the stage. Each of those is an opportunity to change it a little bit. That happens quite often: there's a new song here; there's a change to a lyric there. And I wonder how often that is, as it were, an external pressure? You know, Disney wants another song for this, and how much it's you thinking I can make this a little bit better; I can tinker a little bit more, I've not been quite sure about that? How much do you want to keep tinkering with those old ones?

TR: Well I try not to tinker too much. With *Lion King* they wanted some new songs, which is understandable because the show needed more songs than there were in the film. But what I didn't reckon was that, unfortunately, other people were roped in, people who were involved anyway like the director and this that and the other. Elton and I never really got offered the ideal new spots for songs. In one sense it didn't really matter. And some of the songs that were written were actually very good. But I think the score of *The Lion King* in the theatre does have a few slightly average moments. But the direction is so brilliant that it carries all before it. If I've written a score with a composer, it's always frustrating if other people come in and add their own songs, however good they are, (in fact it's probably more annoying if they're good) because I sort of feel that it's not really a true score of unity and the same feeling all the way through. It doesn't really matter for some shows. I would rather not change it unless I really felt there were some bad lines. I mean there are one or two lines in *Joseph* I've often wanted to change because the rhymes aren't perfect. And we never thought it would become such a big thing all around the world. But people say, 'You can't change that, it's my favourite line!' And you think, oh alright . . . (laughs). There are lines in *Joseph*, very few I hasten to add, which I wouldn't have written now but, then again, I might not have been so good at doing the other bits that do work, from an older standpoint. Who knows?

DH: I want to ask you, Tim, just before we finish, a couple of things about The London Library. We mentioned, at the top, that you've been President for a few years now. Do you remember your first encounter with The London Library?

TR: Gosh! I'm not sure I do. I've certainly been there a few times, over the years. I ought to have an answer ready for that one! I was always aware of the fact that it was there, and it was a wonderful building. It was like an Aladdin's cave of books when you got in there. I used to pop in occasionally but not an awful lot, I must admit. I was amazed and honoured when I was asked to take over from Tom Stoppard. I began going a lot more from 2010 onwards probably. My kids also went there a lot, to do writing and work themselves as well.



So we would often be in there and I grew to like the place very much. I would say that in my early years in London, back in the 70's and 80's, I didn't go there very often. I might well go to a reception there or something. I didn't rely on it. I was out of the country an awful lot as well.

DH: So you've been discovering it, latterly, in this new role then?

TR: Yes, yes to a great extent I have. I mean there have been bits of it I hadn't seen until I actually got the job. But maybe that's quite nice. Maybe it's good to have somebody who comes in, almost as a bit of an outsider. Maybe that works.

DH: It's an extraordinary place. There's so much happening there. One of the things that they're doing at the moment, as I'm sure you know, there's a new Emerging Writers' Programme that's been going for a number of years, that has been helping writers at the beginning of their careers. I want to ask you the question, which I'm sure you must have been asked a million times, about the advice you can give to people at that stage. This is an important part of The London Library's remit now, trying to help people at the beginning of their careers. What advice do you give to writers who want to be songwriters?

TR: Wow, it's very difficult because there are no, certainly in musical theatre, obvious rules. The way I got into it was largely accidental: being in the right place at the right time. And, to a great extent, that's luck. The advice I always give to musical theatre is, try to be original; which is easier said than done. Keep it short and try to make it amusing when you start out. People, older producers, and people with the money are not necessarily interested in doom and gloom. There's plenty of time for that later. It's difficult. If you look at the people who wrote *Six*: that's witty and different; it's quick and it's sharp. And that is an easier ask to get that sort of thing going, because it can be produced fairly quickly, almost anywhere, and yet it's a big story about a big character, even though the big character in question is never in the show: Henry VIII. So those are the sort of things. Aping somebody else's style is a mistake. That's what we did with *The Likes of Us*, we were copying Lionel Bart too heavily. These are all fairly obvious things. At the end of the day the rule is there are no rules. Not much help to anybody, that . . . (laughs).

DH: Thank you. We are, I'm afraid, out of time with this conversation. I should thank The Big Book Weekend for hosting us this conversation and The London Library for organising it. But, especially, thank you very much, Tim Rice.

TR: Thank you, Dan. That's great. Thank you very much.

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