THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

King Kong: A Music Theatre Event and the Dawn of the Megamovical

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an examination of recent trends in musical theatre, focussing on the 2013 musical *King Kong: A Music Theatre Event* as a case study. It discusses the recent musical theatre landscape, demonstrating how *King Kong* is part of a growing trend of Broadway shows that have turned to Hollywood for inspiration. It then locates the musical within the rich history of the *King Kong* narrative, with a particular focus on the three most prominent *King Kong* films: the original from 1933 and two remakes from 1976 and 2005. Finally it describes the creation and development of the musical, before moving into an extensive synopsis (complete with the placement of musical numbers and images from the show), and ending with an analysis of the music, book, and underlying commentary. I argue that the *King Kong* musical is an early exemplar of a new genre of musical theatre: the ‘megamovical’, a new generation of the megamusical, as defined by Jessica Sternfeld in her book of that name, with a particularly close relationship with the film upon which it is based, and briefly examine other examples from recent Broadway shows.
DECLARATION

This is to certify that

i. The thesis comprises only my original work towards the degree of Master of Music (musicology)

ii. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used

iii. The thesis is approximately 40,000 words, inclusive of footnotes but exclusive of words in tables, figures, bibliographies, and appendices.

Signature: ________________________________

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Date: 31 August 2018
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In 1933 directors Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack released their epic film *King Kong*, featuring an overgrown gorilla that is brought back from the remote and unmapped Skull Island to New York City, where he wreaks havoc in his attempt to find and protect the beautiful Ann Darrow. Since the premiere of the original film, the colossal beast has become an icon that has evolved over time starring in numerous remakes, sequels, and television series. In 2013, eighty years after the original film was released, *King Kong* transferred from the big screen to the stage in the form of a musical or ‘music theatre event’, as it was dubbed by its creators.1

The *King Kong* musical began preview performances on 28 May 2013, before its premiere on 15 June 2013 at the Regent Theatre in Melbourne, Australia and ran for seven months; closing on 16 February 2014. The show is Australia’s biggest musical production to date, both physically and financially. Exact figures have not been released (although various reviews put the cost at AUD $30 million), but the show has been described as ‘a multi-million-dollar music theatre event [that] features a cast of 50 actors, singers, dancers, and circus performers, and a six-metre tall, one-tonne leading man—the most technologically advanced puppet in the world.’2

The creative team for *King Kong* boasted an impressive line-up: directed by Daniel Kramer who has extensive experience directing operas in North America and England;3 written by Craig Lucas, who has written numerous scripts for plays, operas, and musicals, including *The Light in the Piazza*, for which he was nominated for a Tony Award for Best Book of a Musical in 2005;4 and choreographed by John “Cha Cha” O’Connell, who worked on the Baz Luhrmann films *Strictly Ballroom*, *Moulin Rouge*, and *The Great Gatsby* as well as the films *Muriel’s Wedding* and *Enchanted*.5 O’Connell also

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5 Michaela Boland, “John ‘Cha Cha’ O’Connell Has the World at His Feet”, *Australian*, 27 March 2014.
chose the stage version of *Strictly Ballroom*. Australian costume designer Roger Kirk was responsible for the more than five hundred costumes used in the show. Kirk has won numerous accolades for his designs for operas and musical theatre in Australia, London, Canada, and the USA, including a Tony Award for the 1996 Broadway production of *The King and I*, and a Tony nomination for 2001 production of *42nd Street*. The score for *King Kong* was arranged by Marius de Vries, a producer for numerous popular artists, including Madonna, Bjork, Annie Lennox, U2, David Bowie, and Josh Groban, as well as Massive Attack and Elbow, who contributed works to *King Kong*. De Vries also collaborated on Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical *Love Never Dies* (the sequel to his famous *The Phantom of the Opera*), and the Australian film *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, which was converted into a musical in 2007. For *King Kong: A Music Theatre Event*, De Vries collaborated with a number of different popular artists (discussed further in Chapter 5) as well as Lucas, Kramer, and lyricist Michael Mitnick.

Despite the creative team’s experience and impressive accolades, the reviews for *King Kong: A Music Theatre Event* were not always positive. The advanced technology used to create and operate Kong was almost unanimously praised, but critics were also greatly dissatisfied with the book, music, and lyrics, as discussed in detail in Chapter 5. Yet, despite the criticisms, the show was described as being unforgettable, awe-inspiring and jaw-dropping. As Tim Carney, a writer for the American website *BroadwayWorld* wrote: ‘the songs aren’t memorable, the story is flawed, and yet *King Kong* the musical is one show that will stay with you long after the final curtain’.

The puppets creators Sonny Tilders, the creative director of The Creatures Technology Company, and Carmen Pavlovic, the CEO of Global Creatures, both acknowledged the importance of the show in Australian history, but admitted that Melbourne was “just a blip”, an “out-of-town trial, an exciting one, but commercially [unviable]”.

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6 Michaela Boland, “John ‘Cha Cha’ O’Connell Has the World at His Feet”, *Australian*, 27 March 2014.


the show premiered in Melbourne, Pavlovic intended the show to go to Broadway, stating that interest in the show in New York City was huge, and that a run on Broadway was the ultimate goal for the show: 'It's not about some illusion or dream of putting a show on Broadway. Putting it on in New York [City] is about the fact that it's the perfect show to tell in New York [City]'.

In mid-January 2014, Gerry Ryan, the chairman of Global Creatures, announced on Melbourne radio that the show would be heading to New York City, and was expected to open on 12 December 2014 at the Lyric theatre (formally known as the Foxwood Theatre). Less than two months later however, on 6 March 2014, The New York Times reported that a spokesperson for King Kong had released a statement announcing that the show will not open as planned 'because of the huge scale of the production, as well as the time needed to implement creative changes'.

In the same article (in a statement that contradicts her earlier comments made shortly after the show opened in which she suggested the show did not require many changes), Pavlovic is quoted as saying:

'King Kong has been more than five years in the making and we are thrilled with the production that played to packed houses in Melbourne. We learnt so much from this first engagement. We realise that here are some exciting creative changes we can and want to make before King Kong comes home to New York City and we don’t want to be pressured to rush in to meet any artificial deadlines. We want to make the best possible show.'

To capture the colossal size and cultural relevance of Kong, the musical featured almost all the elements of a megamusical (a term coined by the New York Times in the 1980s but refined by Jessica Sternfeld) in particular, an emphasis on spectacle (discussed

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10 Quinn, "The Kong and I", 20 October 2012.
12 Patrick Healy, New York Times, 6 March 2014. In an article published on 26 June 2013 in New York Times, Patrick Healy wrote: 'Ms Pavlovic also said she would not seek a total rewrite of the book, by the Tony Award nominee Craig Lucas (The Light in the Piazza), or hire a script doctor to address criticism of the dialogue and story appearing in some of the reviews. Nor does she plan to rethink the score, which includes music as well as contemporary songs... I do expect we'll make some changes to the musical before our next production but we’re all very happy with the shape that the show is in right now, and don’t see a need to rush or make any major changes'.
further in Chapter 1); an increasingly popular device to attract audiences. Moreover, *King Kong* was based on one of the most well-known films in history. The 1933 *King Kong* film and its numerous remakes captivated audiences, making the character of Kong one of the most recognisable icons in Western society. But the *King Kong* musical was more than just the latest megamusical show to premiere; it went beyond attempting to imitate or recreate a cinematic experience on the stage (albeit in a creative manner). There were a number of unusual elements in the show: elements that have not been seen in such proliferation before. It was these usual elements that took the *King Kong* musical into new territory.

In this thesis, I will examine the 2013 *King Kong: A Music Theatre Event*, as a case study for the increasingly popular conversion of films into megamusicals, which I have termed megamovicals (a portmanteau of ‘mega’ and movicals, the colloquial term for film-to-stage adaptations). My intention is not to uphold *King Kong* as the prime example of a successful megamovical—in fact, as I discuss, *King Kong* was considered unsuccessful in many ways—but to use this new and developing musical as a case study that will allow me to examine how big-budget shows have changed, to the extent that a new form of musical may be identified. To understand the megamovical, my thesis examines three distinct areas: why, and at what rate, are movicals being produced on Broadway; how have films been adapted for the stage in recent years (using *King Kong* as the prime example); and finally identifying and discussing various eclectic elements that are becoming common in recent musicals, in particular, megamovicals.

As *King Kong* only premiered relatively recently, and has not yet opened on Broadway, there is no existing literature specifically addressing this musical, except for online reviews and articles. There is, however, a range of existing literature on Broadway musicals, often discussing more general trends, on which I have drawn.

Scholarship on American musical theatre has traditionally focused on important works, performers, composers and lyricists or major events from the twentieth century, such as World War One or Two. For example, a great deal of research has been produced on major contributors such as Stephen Sondheim, Bob Fosse, Oscar Hammerstein II and Richard Rodgers, etc. Consequently, much of the scholarship to focus on the American Broadway musical jumps from one historical figure or major event to the next, with little consideration for what happened in between or for lesser-known entities or events. There is however, a growing interest in musical theatre scholarship with academics in
this area often publishing in journals that address performing and theatre more generally. For example, many leading academics have published works in the journal *Studies in Musical Theatre* (2006), including Paul R. Laird and Jessica Sternfeld. Their articles "It Couldn't Happen Here in Oz': *Wicked* and the Creation of the ‘Critic-proof’ Musical’ and ‘Musical Theatre and the Almighty Dollar: What A Tangled Web They Weave” respectively were integral to my research, providing insight into large-scale modern megamusicals and its reception by both critics and the public.14

*The Cambridge Companion to the Musical* and *The Oxford Companion to the American Musical* were published in 2002 and 2008 respectively, confirming scholarly interest in this area of study. These companions to the musical remain useful sources for broader concepts, including biographical details about noteworthy contributors to the Broadway musical as well as broad (and often superficial) historical, cultural, and social context for a wide range of musicals.15 However, much of the available scholarship, including the aforementioned sources, focuses upon certain musicals that are considered to be turning points in musical theatre history, such as *Oklahoma! or Porgy and Bess*, or on individual composers, directors, lyricists, etc., such as Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, or Stephen Sondheim, whose contributions are considered to be of particular significance.

The crossover between Hollywood and Broadway theatre has been addressed in scholarly sources, however, the focus remains on Broadway musicals becoming Hollywood films, not vice versa, e.g. Thomas Hischak’s contribution to *The Oxford Companion to the Musical: Theatre, Film, and Television* and his published book *Through the Screen Door: What Happened to the Broadway Musical When It Went to Hollywood.* His latter work is one of the only academic works to address the conversion of Hollywood films into Broadway musicals, but his discussion of this phenomenon is brief – he appears to address the topic because it is a trend that can no longer be ignored, but appears reluctant to provide any rationale for this growing trend, instead simply

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outlining the major changes between some well-known musicals that transition from film to Broadway show. Despite their more comprehensive scope, however, the aforementioned sources contain little mention of the megamusicals or the conversion of films into musicals.

Jessica Sternfeld’s book, published in 2006, titled *The Megamusical*, is the most comprehensive work of scholarship on megamusicals to date. Sternfeld’s research focuses upon the creation of the megamusical (also known as the blockbuster musical) in the 1970s and its development in the 1980s. She discusses three specific megamusicals in particular detail: *Cats*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and *Les Misérables*. In the final three chapters of her book she briefly addresses other megamusicals of the 1980s, 1990s, and the twenty-first century. Her work outlines the characteristics of megamusicals and includes a discussion of the creation and development of the three musicals she focuses upon, including the style and socioeconomic influences. Sternfeld states in the introduction of her book: ‘the most valuable sources for the study of megamusicals come from outside musicology. The main secondary materials are reviews and articles in the media and coffee table books’. Sternfeld’s work and her collation of information from various secondary sources is a key resource for this thesis.

For a more detailed discussion of the *King Kong* films, in particular the original 1933 film upon which the subsequent movies and the musical are inspired, numerous scholarly sources are available. *King Kong Cometh: The Evolution of the Great Ape*, edited by Paul A. Woods, is a collation of articles written by film critics, directors, and writers all addressing different aspects or interpretations of the original *King Kong* film. Cynthia Erb’s book *Tracking King Kong: A Hollywood Icon in World Culture*, as well as Ray Morton’s work *King Kong: History of a Movie Icon from Fay Wray to Peter Jackson*, provided an understanding of King Kong as an internationally recognised icon that remained culturally relevant from the original 1933 film to Peter Jackson’s 2005 remake. To further supplement my understanding of cinematic history, techniques and styles, I turned to various film studies from general overviews, such as Cook’s *A History of Film Music*, *The Hollywood Film Reader* and Kathryn Kalinak’s *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film* to sources with a specific focus such as Seymour

Chatman’s *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* and Pam Cook’s various works on Baz Luhrmann’s cinematic style. Like many similar scholarly works, these sources provide a platform for interpreting the music theatre event, but, as I will discuss further, the two art forms have innumerable differences; therefore many of these interpretations are not pertinent to my examination of the musical.

My discussion of the *King Kong* musical will draw primarily on my personal observations of the show, but will be supplemented with various primary and secondary sources such as the material produced by the marketing team, including interviews with various members of the creative and performance teams, the extensive range of material released on social media, YouTube clips, the *School Resource Pack* produced by Global Creatures, public forums, reviews, and advertisements. Despite multiple attempts, the director, producer, and other members of the creative and performance teams declined to be interviewed or answer questions about the show. Moreover, I was unable to gain access to a copy of a score. It has since been suggested by multiple sources involved in the show that the musical did not have a written score. Instead, the band (who had minimal involvement as much of the music was pre-recorded) relied on charts. Although access to these sources would have been preferable, they are not essential to my research, as my thesis is not solely an analysis of *King Kong* musical, but instead uses the show as a case study for an emerging style of musical theatre.

This thesis is divided into three distinct sections: the first section (Chapters 1 and 2) outlines the current landscape of musical theatre, and lays the foundation for subsequent chapters. In Chapter 1, I provide an overview of Sternfeld’s research on megamusicals, the characteristics that define the genre, and its maturation since its inception on Broadway in the 1980s. In Chapter 2, I analyse the data showing the growing trend of converting films into musicals, and discuss reasons for the increasing popularity of this genre by drawing on some of the debate on this practice as published.

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19 Other musicals produced and released their scores relatively shortly after premiering. For example, *Matilda* released a score approximately two years after its West End premiere, but before the Broadway premiere, as did *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. On the other hand, *Book of Mormon* released a score one month after its Broadway premiere.

20 Sternfeld’s book focuses exclusively on the Broadway musical. The West End and other international theatre hubs are only discussed for context. Consequently, my thesis will also primarily focus on Broadway musicals, unless otherwise indicated.
in newspapers and online sources. In the second section of my thesis (Chapters 3, 4, and 5) I discuss King Kong specifically. In Chapter 3, I provide an overview of the many King Kong films; with a particular focus on the three most well-known and popular films produced in 1933, 1976, and 2005. A detailed synopsis of the original 1933 film provides a foundation and reference point for subsequent discussions, including the differences between the three aforementioned films and the musical. I also provide an overview of the theories and speculations about the representation of Kong in the film, and his iconic status in American culture. Chapter 4 addresses the external features of the King Kong musical, in particular the creation and advertising of the show. In Chapter 5, I examine the internal features of the musical, beginning with a detailed synopsis of the music theatre event, complete with images of the show, title of songs, and quotations from various members of the creative team about their intentions. I then explore the multifaceted subtexts of the show. On a superficial level, the staged show appears to be simply a recreation of preceding films, drawing inspiration from all three aforementioned films; however, the musical also offers a more complex message and commentary of our current society. My focus is then turned to the music featured in the show: the eclectic array of musical styles is highly unusual for a (Broadway-bound) musical. I conclude this thesis with an examination of some of the features that distinguish King Kong: A Music Theatre Event from earlier examples of megamusicals, paying particular attention to the ways in which it has been influenced by the preceding films and cinematic spectacle more generally. I will also look briefly at several other recent musicals that exhibit similar traits and will suggest that together they point to the emergence of a new style of film-inspired megamusical, or ‘megamovical’.
Megamusicals—also described as "spectacles", "extravaganzas" and "blockbuster musicals"—have been a dominant genre of musical theatre since their arrival on Broadway in the 1970s and 1980s. Despite the megamusicals’ dominance on Broadway for the past thirty years, scholarly works that examine this genre in depth have only started to emerge in the past decade. In 2006, Jessica Sternfeld published a book, based on her PhD thesis, titled *The Megamusical*, which has become the leading scholarship on this genre of musical theatre. In her work, Sternfeld identifies six characteristics of the megamusical and discusses the evolution and maturation of the genre over three generations. These characteristics are exhibited in most, but not necessarily all, megamusicals, and can be summarised as:

- Epic, dramatic shows featuring recurring melodies in a sung-through score [1], huge impressive sets [2], and grand ideas [3] accompanied by intensive marketing campaigns [4], unprecedented international financial success [5], and a marked dichotomy between critical reaction and audience reception [6].

These six characteristics can be classified into external or internal features as a means of differentiating elements that are heard or seen in- or outside the theatre. The external features include aggressive marketing, economic success, reception, and cultural currency, whereas the internal features include the score, narrative, and sets. In order to distinguish the different stages of maturation of the megamusical, Sternfeld suggests three generations of this genre, which approximately follow the three decades since its emergence: the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.

In this Chapter I provide a thorough outline of Sternfeld’s work, focussing on the characteristics of the genre and any developments since its inception. Having established the key features of megamusicals, I propose the emergence of the megamovical, and include an overview of the characteristics that distinguish this new

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form of musical theatre from its predecessors. These characteristics will be discussed further in Chapter 6, in which I outline how the *King Kong* musical exhibited these traits.

In her study, Sternfeld examines three musicals in detail: *Cats*, *Les Misérables*, and *The Phantom of the Opera*. She also examines other musicals from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, but in less detail. Sternfeld argues that the megamusical genre began with Andrew Lloyd Webber’s 1971 musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which she labels the proto-megamusical. The megamusical genre was not established, however, until the 1980s when Lloyd Webber, composer-lyricist duo Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil along with producer Cameron Mackintosh began producing their highly acclaimed shows. Lloyd Webber’s musicals *Cats* (written in 1981) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1988) set the standard for future megamusicals. Boublil and Schönberg, however, were quick to follow suit, writing their hit shows *Les Misérables* (1987) and *Miss Saigon* (1991). Although these shows had common characteristics, the term ‘megamusical’ had only been used colloquially, until Sternfeld’s book was published in 2006.

According to Sternfeld, the plots of megamusicals featured grand yet serious stories of romance, war, life, and death, the undercurrents of which were universally relevant. The stories were often (but not always) set in the distant past, perhaps framed by an historical episode, and portraying specific locations and events. The music included set songs as well as linking, transitional, and recitative-like material. As a result, these musicals are closely related to the operatic tradition: they have little or no spoken dialogue, and the music ties various elements of the narrative together. Sternfeld writes that there were three defining traits of the music in megamusicals:

First, the recurrence of musical material in different guises over the course of the show, though not new to music theatre or even to Broadway musicals, is manifested in three somewhat idiosyncratic ways. Short motifs or themes used representatively, carry emotional or character-related meaning, appear at key moments; second, sung melodies return in new contexts with new lyrics, sometimes related to the original lyrics and sometimes completely different; and third—and most unexpectedly—songs receive brief previews before being sung.

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in their full forms. Each of these techniques brings added emotion and layers of meaning to the story and characters.\textsuperscript{6}

The reoccurrence of musical material throughout the show ties difference scenes together and can provide additional insight into the story and characters, as discussed below. The second trait is the use of small sections of musical material strung together during long scenes of the show.\textsuperscript{7} This technique typically employs the first trait of repeated musical material, which is then linked to form an extended piece. Third, different musical styles and genres were assigned to main characters, making them distinct from each other and providing an insight into the character’s personality and perhaps their relationship with other characters.

Although it is rather later than the musicals examined by Sternfeld, Stephen Schwartz’s score for his highly acclaimed and extremely popular megamusical, \textit{Wicked} provides an example of all of the aforementioned techniques. The short “Unlimited” theme (as Schwartz labels it) is associated with the main character, Elphaba, but is one of the most common motifs heard throughout the musical (see Example 1).

\textbf{Example 1}: "Unlimited" theme from the song “Defying Gravity” from \textit{Wicked}. The lead character, Elphaba, performs this theme through the musical.\textsuperscript{8}

This theme uses the same eight notes as the opening sequence in the well-known song “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” from \textit{The Wizard of Oz}, upon which the musical is loosely based. The theme is used to convey unspoken insight into Elphaba’s character. Throughout the show, the theme is in a minor tonality, hinting at Elphaba’s soon-to-be-exposed wickedness. There is, however, one exception: the theme is played in a major tonality when Elphaba uses her powers for good to heal her disabled sister. The lyrics of

\textsuperscript{6}Sternfeld, \textit{The Megamusical}, 27.

\textsuperscript{7}Sternfeld, \textit{The Megamusical}, 28.

the "Unlimited" theme also change throughout the show, from 'Unlimited, my future is unlimited', which Elphaba sings in the second song of the show, to the exact opposite, 'I'm limited', heard in "Defying Gravity" sung at the end of Act I. As Paul R. Laird states, 'the “Unlimited” theme...at first describes Elphaba’s hopes for a bright future...but later come to represent acceptance of her own limitations.9

Perhaps the most recognisable element of a megamusical, however, was the sets, which were expensive, impressive, and complicated: as Sternfeld writes, the genre ‘seems to demand some sort of physical huggeness’.10 The Phantom of the Opera featured a falling chandelier, Miss Saigon had a helicopter land and take off on stage, Les Misérables had a revolving stage floor, and Wicked featured flying actors and huge moving sets. Although the sets were, and continue to be, a crucial feature of megamusicals, Sternfeld suggests that shows that relied primarily on huge sets tend to be unsuccessful, whereas the shows that were also grounded by a well-written book and score are more successful.11

The external features of megamusicals were similarly extravagant: ‘New megamusicals, especially in the 1980s, were cultural events marketed with unprecedented force... complete with logos, theme songs, advertisements saturating newspapers, radio, and television’.12 Certain songs, or the entire score of a musical, were often released to audiences as a cast recording before the show’s official opening. The easily identifiable and accessible elements of the show (such as the logo and cast recording), as well as the media hype created by these ‘cultural events’, kept the megamusical in the public’s minds, leading to a huge number of advanced ticket sales and massive profits (when successful). Megamusicals had the potential to become moneymaking machines, drawing crowds for years, or even decades. Once these shows were well established in New York City, they toured the world, resulting in an even greater economic gain. The universally relatable narrative of these shows meant audiences from Europe, Asia, and Australasia could relate to the stories and their grand ideas.

Not everyone, however, was thrilled by the megamusical style. Sternfeld identified a marked dichotomy between critical and audience responses as one of the key features of

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10 Sternfeld, The Megamusical, 2.
12 Sternfeld, The Megamusical, 3.
the megamusical genre. Audiences loved the powerful and spectacular shows, whereas critics believed these musicals merely appealed to mass audiences rather than challenging or educating spectators. As Sternfeld states, many (American) critics disliked the earlier megamusicals on principle, partly because they were created by foreigners (i.e. the “British Invasion”), and partly because of the popular and glitzy style of these new musicals. She observed, however:

Critics, in the case of the megamusical, largely ceased to matter. The new advertising style generated so much interest in a show that poor reviews, and lack of pithy positive quotes attached to a show’s ad campaign, went unnoticed. And audiences kept coming: long after the initial hype had subsided. Were the critics missing something? How could they dislike a show that audiences so wholeheartedly embraced? Were they out of touch, no longer able to relate to the taste of the average theatregoer? The dichotomy between audience and critics form a fundamental element of the megamusical...

In 2011, Laird also addressed the redundancy of critics in modern musicals, specifically Wicked, in his article, “It Couldn’t Happen Here in Oz’: Wicked and the Creation of the ‘Critic-proof’ Musical’. According to Laird, a successful musical that defies negative critiques requires a pop-oriented score with symphonic conceptions, a core demographic (which often differs from those writing the critiques) and a narrative that resonated with Americans. Although most modern musicals are centred on an American fantasy, the original megamusicals discussed in Sternfeld’s book were often far removed from America and Broadway.

At the time of writing her book (published in 2006), Sternfeld suggested that there were three generations of megamusicals, roughly following the three decades since its emergence: the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s. Each generation of megamusical exhibits different traits and focuses on different aspects of the megamusical genre. The first generation of megamusicals included the shows that defined the genre: Cats, Les Misérables, Starlight Express, The Phantom of the Opera, Miss Saigon, etc. These shows exhibited the traits outlined above. What differentiated these shows from their predecessors however, was their foreignness. They were part of what came to be known

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as the “British Invasion”, in which musicals transferred from West End to Broadway, not vice versa as had been tradition.\textsuperscript{15} They were not primarily set in America, were written by British and French citizens, were first performed to British audiences, and premiered on West End one to two years before opening on Broadway.\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, both \textit{The Phantom of the Opera} and \textit{Les Misérables} have French settings: \textit{Phantom} is set at the Paris Opera House and is based upon a French novel by Gaston Leroux, while \textit{Les Misérables} is based upon a book by Victor Hugo and is set during the Paris Uprising of 1832. Of the three works discussed extensively in Sternfeld’s book, \textit{Cats} is the only one with an American connection; it was written by American born T.S. Eliot, who became a naturalised British subject over a decade before publishing his work \textit{Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats} upon which the musical is based.

The second generation of megamusicals included shows such as \textit{The Scarlet Pimpernel}, and \textit{Beauty and the Beast}.\textsuperscript{17} These shows from the 1990s were more light-hearted than the earlier generation and often featured more dialogue and fewer songs. There were still some megamusicals from this generation with a sung-through score, but many shows included more dialogue than the previous generation. Perhaps the most significant difference between the first and second generation of megamusicals was the nationality and settings of the shows. While the first generation travelled from the West End to Broadway, the second generation saw American composers and lyricists take on the megamusical genre, giving their shows an American setting. This was particular apparent towards the end of the decade: megamusicals from the later years of the 1990s were set in America (\textit{Sunset Boulevard, Ragtime}). There were a few second-generation megamusicals that were set in foreign locations, but were generally written by American composers and lyricists (\textit{Jekyll & Hyde, Titanic, Beauty and the Beast, The Lion King}).

The third generation of megamusicals emerged in the 2000s when Sternfeld was writing her book, and included shows such as \textit{Aida, The Producers, Bombay Dreams, Dance of the Vampires}, and \textit{Wicked} (which Sternfeld suggested could be called a “post-megamusical” because of its irony and self-mocking satire\textsuperscript{18}). Sternfeld briefly outlined the direction in

\textsuperscript{15} Sternfeld, \textit{The Megamusical}, 83.


\textsuperscript{17} Sternfeld, \textit{The Megamusical}, 78.

\textsuperscript{18} Sternfeld, \textit{Megamusical}, 349.
which these third generation musicals were heading: they continued to move away from a sung-through score, and the plots were less lofty, while the sets became even more 'mega', thanks to advances in technology. Although Sternfeld’s discussion of this third generation was picking up trends that were just starting to emerge in musical theatre at this time, these elements became increasingly important characteristics in recent megamusicals.

The megamusical genre has continued to change and evolve in the decade since the publication of Sternfeld’s book. Although she does not discuss the possibility of a fourth generation of megamusicals, in the final page of her book, she acknowledges the increasing prominence of film-to-musical conversions on Broadway, and suggests this is a discernible and popularising new form of musical theatre.\footnote{Sternfeld, Megamusical, 352.} In 2011 Sternfeld, in collaboration with Elizabeth Woolman, picked up this thread again in an article that readdressed film-to-musical conversions, titled “Musical theatre and the almighty dollar: What a tangled web they weave”. Sternfeld and Woolman discuss Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark and other modern musicals:

Shows can no longer run without the lure of familiarity; revivals and staged versions of film and television shows are the norm; celebrities draw crowds, even to sub-par material... audiences are steadily becoming more rude and ignorant, expect a cinematic experience when they see a live show, and do not want to think terribly hard about whether what they are watching is art or not.\footnote{Elizabeth Woolman and Jessica Sternfeld, “Musical Theatre and Almighty Dollar: What a Tangled Web They Weave”, Studies in Musical Theatre 5, no. 1 (2011): 8.}

These features, in particular the expectation for a cinematic experience in a live show, characterise a significant subset of recent megamusicals known colloquially as ‘movicals’ or ‘megamovicals’. But what is a megamovical? And is it really becoming more popular?
CHAPTER 2

Movicals

Musical theatre has a long tradition of adapting works, mostly from books or plays, but since the 1950s, Broadway has increasingly turned to Hollywood for inspiration. From the 1950s to '80s, the adaptation of films into Broadway musicals was sporadic, but in the past 25 years it has become increasingly common and is now a dominant genre on Broadway. As yet, there is no significant scholarly work focusing on this phenomenon in detail. There has, however, been some informal discussion about the newly emerging and increasingly popular form in articles printed in newspapers and magazines, and has been mentioned (but not discussed at length) in a number of books.

To determine the frequency of film-to-stage conversions, I conducted a thorough data collection, which I present in this Chapter in the form of multiple graphs. I have also analysed the various forms of film-to-stage conversions, and how these forms might be identified. I then provide an overview of some of the dialogue that addresses this phenomenon, discussing various reasons why Broadway has turned to Hollywood for inspiration in recent years.

To examine this growing trend in the relationship between film and musicals, I analysed data from the most accessible, up-to-date, and extensive online source for dates and biographical details: Internet Broadway Database (IBDb). The biographical details were gathered from theatre programs and supplemented with information from newspapers, magazine reports, theatrical textbooks, interviews with theatre professionals, and The Broadway League archives. IBDb provides the names and positions of production staff and cast, song lists, as well as awards and nominations that the show or individuals have received. A number of links are also provided to view gross takings and attendance for each show, as well as the official website for each musical, where possible. IBDb also provides some information about original sources that were inspirations for shows, when known. My data has also been cross-referenced with the online database, Playbill Vault, which is a subset of the Playbill magazine. The information displayed on this website is almost identical to the IBDb website, but Playbill Vault also includes a very brief synopsis as well as images from the playbill.
booklet for each show. Playbill Vault also contains more information about pre-existing sources than the IBDb.²

I collated information for over 900 musicals that have been performed on Broadway since 1950.³ This information includes the number of performances and preview performances for each show and its categorisation (e.g. original, revival, comedy, drama, etc.) as identified by IBDb. Using this data I was able to calculate the total and average number of performances per year. I divided the musicals into two classifications: musicals for which there is an earlier film (but not necessary based on that film), and musicals for which there is no known film from which the musical might be inspired, which I have labelled “non-movicals”. There are two streams of musicals which are preceded by a film: the first is musicals which are known be based on, or inspired by, a film; colloquially referred to as “movicals”. The second stream, which I have labelled “possible film adaptations”, includes shows for which a film precedes the musical, but the relationship between that film and the musical is unknown or unclear. To assist in understanding the conversion of films into musicals, I have provided a diagram (see Figure 1) outlining the various pathways for such a conversion.

Determining whether a show is a movical or non-movical is relatively straightforward, as the information required to make this categorisation is readily available, most of the time. Determining if a film is based on or inspired by a preceding film, on the other hand, is more difficult as the information can be ambiguous or misconstrued. For this reason, my method requires discussion.

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² Although the IBDb and Playbill Vault are not considered academic sources, the information provided on these websites is sufficient to provide an overview (albeit as detailed as possible) of film-to-stage adaptions, rather than a finely detailed analysis of individual musicals. Although it is possible that I have not accounted for all preceding films, my data would not be significantly altered, and therefore my conclusions remain intact.

³ My research exclusively focuses on musicals that have been performed on Broadway. Screen-to-stage conversions that have been performed on off-Broadway, off-off-Broadway theatres, by touring companies, on West End, or other international theatre districts have not been included in this study. This is primarily due to the information available on the IBDb and Playbill Vault sites.
The classification of “possible film adaptation” includes all musicals for which there is a preceding film. For most musicals in this category, it is unclear whether the musical is inspired, or influenced, by the preceding film or not. Determining the relationship of a musical to a preceding film is difficult without a clear indication from the show’s creators or producers, or substantial research into each individual musical and film, which is beyond the scope of the current study. I have therefore classified any musicals for which there is a preceding film as a “possible film adaptation”, regardless of whether the film was produced many decades before the staged show, is a documentary, is a film musical, or if both the film and musical are based on a book or play, unless there is a direct connection. For example, many films and television series precede the megamusical *Les Misérables* (some as early as 1912), which premiered on Broadway in 1987. As such, it is difficult to determine how much of an inspiration or influence these numerous films had upon the musical, if any. The musical and the preceding films are all based on the French novel of the same name by Victor Hugo, therefore, the musical does not necessarily adopt elements of any of the films, even though they share a similar

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4 Film adaptations have also been referred to as ‘film-to-musical’ and ‘film-to-stage’ conversions or adaptations.

5 Determining the influence of a preceding film on a musical would require significant time to research and analysis each show. That is not possible within the confines of this thesis.
narrative. However, the creators would undoubtedly have given at least some thought to the earlier films during the musical’s development, particularly if the film is more recent, as the staged show and the movies would not have escaped comparison by critics or audiences. For example, the musical *Little Women*, which premiered on Broadway in 2005, is preceded by at least three films released in 1933, 1949, and 1994. According to the IBDb and Playbill Vault websites, *Little Women* is based on Louisa May Alcott’s novel by the same name; there is no mention of the films. Considering the 1994 film featured a number of well known celebrities (Wynona Ryder, Kirsten Dunst, Claire Danes, Christian Bale, and Susan Sarandon), a new generation would have become aware of, and familiar with, Alcott’s story as a result of the film, and would therefore have compared the film to the musical. The same could be said for the many musicals based on Charles Dickens’ novels, or musicals based on plays such as *Peter Pan* and *My Fair Lady*.

The classification of “movicals” refers to musicals that are known to be based on, or inspired by, a film. This includes musicals such as *The Lion King*, *Once*, *Newsies*, *Mary Poppins*, and so on. I have subdivided this category into two sub-streams: literal and non-literal conversions. Most literal movicals come from a film in which music is a key element. In these literal movicals, the “kernels” (a term used by Seymour Chatman, author of *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, that refers to the essential elements of a narrative) have been maintained: the narrative is almost identical to the film, the songs from the original film (typically performed by the characters) are retained in the staged show, and the characters are the same. There are usually some, mostly insignificant, differences between the film and the musical, such as the role and/or name of secondary characters, minor elements of the narrative (referred to as ‘satellites’ by Chatman), and perhaps additional songs. Literally converted movicals have the advantage of drawing audiences who are familiar with the preceding film and/or the music and songs. By the time a literal movical premieres on Broadway, the soundtrack for the preceding film has usually been widely circulated and has

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8 Chatman suggests that the omission of satellites does not disturb the logic of the plot, but can ‘impoverish the narrative aesthetically’, 54.
become well known and beloved, and can therefore often entice audiences to a musical based upon this soundtrack alone. *Dirty Dancing* for example, was a show that simply allowed the audience to re-experience the film in a live setting. Cassie Tongue for Aussie Theatre suggested, "everything in this show wants to be, has to be, exactly like the film. The costumes match. The lines match. The voices do their best to warble just like the soundtrack warbled...[this show is a] nostalgia-driven vehicle that exists purely for commercial gain".⁹

One of the most successful franchises that fall into this classification is the plethora of Disney film musicals. Disney has become a leader of literal movicals with *The Lion King* (1997), *Tarzan* (2006), *Mary Poppins* (2006), *High School Musical* (2007), *The Little Mermaid* (2008), *High School Musical 2* (2008), *Newsies* (2011), and *Aladdin* (2014). Despite Disney films being literal movicals, the conversions are widely varied. *Beauty and Beast* was as direct an adaptation as possible. The sets, costumes, make-up, songs, and narrative were all made to resemble the film; the producers even cast actors who resembled the characters.¹⁰ Conversely, *The Lion King*—Disney's most successful musical and the highest grossing musical on Broadway in history, surpassing even *The Phantom of the Opera*, which has been running nine years longer than *The Lion King*—was very visually different from the film. These differences include the substitution of anthropomorphic puppets for animals, the actors wearing costumes that depict the scenery in simple symbolic and representative art as well as face paint, masks, and creative costumes. Ben Brantley, of *The New York Times*, wrote:

> The ways in which [the director of *The Lion King*] Ms Taymor translates the film's opening musical number "Circle of Life", where an animal kingdom of the African plains gathers to pay homage to its leonine ruler and his newly born heir, is filled with astonishment and promise. It is immediately clear that this production... is not going to follow the path pursued by Disney's first Broadway venture, *Beauty and the Beast*, a literal-minded exercise in turning its cinematic model into three dimensions...While this *Lion King* holds fast to much of the film's basic plot and dialogue, Ms Taymor has abandoned none of the singular, and often haunting, visual flourishes...But in many ways, Ms Taymor's vision...collides with that of Disney, where visual spectacle is harnessed in the

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¹⁰ Disney films, in particular, have returned to this practice with each element of the show imitating the film, e.g. the 2014 adaptation of *Aladdin*. 
service of heart-warming storytelling...The words and the jokes here are familiar from the movie. So are many of the mostly unexceptional songs...\(^{11}\)

Despite the differences between the original film and the musical, *The Lion King* is still classified as a literal conversion as the narrative, music, characters, and sets are taken from the film, albeit in a creative manner.

The second sub-category, non-literal movicals, includes musicals that are only loosely based on a preceding film. In most cases, music is not a key element of the film. This includes musicals such as *Catch Me If You Can: The Musical*,\(^ {12}\) *Bring It On: The Musical*, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. In these non-literal movicals, the narrative may have been altered or updated, the cast may have been expanded or reduced, and most importantly, musical numbers have been added. The reasons for altering the narrative from the film are varied, but can include copyright issues, or simply a desire by the production team to update an outmoded story, as was the case with *Bring It On* and *Sister Act*, respectively.

Despite their differences from the original movie, these shows are still classified as movicals as they are clearly inspired by a preceding film. For these movicals, the preceding film will generally include a combination of backing scores, pop songs, or diegetic music, all of which enhances the film’s quality, but does not propel the narrative. As the original films have little more than non-diegetic scores, the composers and lyricists for these musicals are not hindered or limited in their musical scope, so long as what they produce is appropriate for the story. As a result, composers and lyricists for musicals that are based upon non-musical films (that is films in which music is not an essential element) have the added challenge of inserting songs into a narrative that is already fully functional, well established, and often well-known without music. Although the narrative of a film that has been converted into a musical can be enticing for audiences, the disruption to their beloved film by the addition of musical numbers can cause disappointment. For example, the 2012 *Ghost: The Musical*, based on the much-loved film featuring Demi Moore, Patrick Swayze, and Whoopi Goldberg, premiered on Broadway in 2012 to negative reviews, not only for its excessive use of

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\(^{12}\) Some musicals use the semicolon in their title, (e.g. *Bring It On: The Musical*) whilst others do not (e.g. *Matilda the Musical*). For the sake of consistency, I will use the semicolon throughout this thesis.
projections and clunky technology, but also emotionless and banal music and lyrics. Charles Isherwood of The New York Times summarised the show: it ‘may not be the worst musical ever made from a movie... But it is just as flavourless and lacking in dramatic vitality as many that have come before.’ Conversely, Billy Elliot: The Musical took a widely disseminated film about a young North Eastern English boy from a poor family who have been affected by the miners’ strikes and whose desire is to become a ballet dancer and made the seemingly unmusical storyline into a multi-award winning show.

The final classification, “non-movicals”, includes all musicals that have no known connection to an earlier film. Unfortunately, there are some musicals that fall into this classification, yet benefit from an association with an earlier film or television series. Wicked, for example, does not qualify as a movical or possible film adaptation, as it is based upon a book and has no preceding film. Yet, the musical is full of references, and is heavily indebted, to the classic 1939 film The Wizard of Oz. The same could be said for Avenue Q: a satirical adult version of the children’s television program Sesame Street; or The Best Little Whorehouse Goes Public, which is a sequel to the musical and film, The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas. Due to this disparity, there were a few incidences in which I altered the classification of a musical (mostly from “non-movical” to “possible film adaptation”), as I believed the classification was inappropriate. Such incidences were rare and were only performed when it was clear that the classification was misleading.

From the information I gathered for over 900 musicals, I identified approximately 400 shows that are preceded by a film. By examining these musicals specifically, I observed a discernible increase in the production of movicals on Broadway, beginning with Hazel Flagg (1953), which was based upon the 1937 film Nothing Sacred, and ending with the last possible film adaptation to be released in 2016, A Bronx Tale the Musical. During the 2000s, the number of movicals that premiered on Broadway accelerated with over thirty shows throughout the decade (see Figure 2). In the incomplete 2010 to 2019 bracket, there have already been 38 possible film adaptations and 26 movicals that have premiered on Broadway. To understand the influence of films on Broadway musicals, I have divided the following graphs into three categories: movicals and non-movicals

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follow the above description, whereas the third categorisation is “preceded by film” which includes both possible film adaptations and movicals. The graphs also depict the year in which the movical or possible film adaptation debuted on Broadway, not the years in which they were performed.

**Figure 2:** The number of musicals preceded by a film and movicals between the years 1950 and 2015 (data divided by decade).

When the data is divided into five-year increments, it is evident that musicals that are preceded by a film remained steadily high in the 2000s. Movicals, in particular, significantly increased from the 2000s. The number of movicals that premiered on Broadway in the first five years of the 2010s remains high, suggesting that such musicals have continued to be a popular format since the early 2000s (see Figure 4). As the exact figures do not take into account the number of musicals premiered on Broadway, I have also provided the percentage of possible film adaptations and movicals (see Figure 4 for the same data as Figure 3 presented in percentages).
Figure 3: The number of musicals preceded by a film and movicals between the years 1950 and 2014 (data divided by 5-year increments).

By comparing Figure 3 with Figure 4, we can see that although the absolute number of movicals that debuted on Broadway dropped between 2005 to 2009 and 2010 to 2014 (from 21 to 20), the percentage has remained the same (28%). We can also observe that the number of musicals preceded by a film rose from 29 to 43 in the periods 2000 to 2004 and 2005 to 2009, but the percentage increase was minimal (51% to 57%). Figure 4 also demonstrates that musicals preceded by a film have been the dominant form (i.e. over 50%) since the 1990s.
Isolating the data since 2000, we can observe that musicals preceded by a film have accounted for up to 88% of all musicals debuted on Broadway, seen in 2012, followed by 73% in 2000, and 71% in 2008 (see Figure 5). Movicals, in particular, have accounted for 44% of shows debuted on Broadway in 2012, followed by 38% in 2008, and 33% in 2007 (see Figure 5).

Figure 4: The percentage of musicals preceded by a film and movicals between the years 1950 and 2014 (data divided by 5-year increments).

Figure 5: The percentage of musicals preceded by a film and movicals that premiered on Broadway between the years 2000 and 2014.
Falling outside my scope for this data collection are a number of possible film adaptations that have been performed, or are still running on the West End, but have not yet premiered on Broadway. These include *Made in Dagenham*, based on the 2010 film of the same name; *The Commitments*, also based on a novel that was made into a film in 1991; and *Bend It Like Beckham*, based on the 2002 film. There are also a number of possible film adaptations expected to premiere on Broadway in the coming year including *Mean Girls* based on the 2004 hit; *Frozen* based on the 2013 Disney film; and *Pretty Woman* based on the 1990 romance comedy. A 2013 article in *New York Times* also claimed that the films *Animal House*, *Back to the Future*, *The Sting*, *Mrs Doubtfire*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Tootsie*, and *Magic Mike* are rumoured to be in development to be made into musicals.\(^{17}\)

My data also does not include the many plays that were performed, or will be performed in Broadway theatres, which are also based on films. They includes *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, based on the 1962 Katherine Hepburn film; *Noises Off*, based on the 1992 film; and *Misery*, based on the 1990 film. Interestingly, a new play, *Hand To God*, is deliberately bucking the trend by rejecting the many elements that are considered necessary for a successful show: "No movie stars. No London transfer. No film adaptation".\(^{18}\) Drawing attention to the play's originality (i.e. highlighting that the show is not derived from a film and using this as a selling point) sets this show apart from contemporary works, many of which are—as my data has demonstrated—possible film adaptations.

The increase in possible film adaptations and movicals has become widely acknowledged in media and popular arenas, but the reasons why possible film adaptations or movicals have become more popular and enjoyed greater box office success remains mostly speculative. Many journalists and critics have guessed reasons for this phenomenon, but to date there has been very little scholarly input on this discussion. A 2006 panel titled 'From Screen to Stage (and Back Again): Hollywood’s Impact on Broadway' is the most extensive discussion on this growing trend to date.\(^{19}\)

\(^{17}\) Patrick Healy, "Like the Movie, Only Different", *New York Times*, 1 August 2013.


\(^{19}\) "From Screen to Stage (and Back Again): Hollywood’s Impact on Broadway", *Columbia Journal of Law & the Arts* 29 (July 2006): 461–480.
The panel was chaired by Steven Chaikelson, an adjunct lecturer in Law at Columbia, and included lawyer Elliot H. Brown, author of the article ‘Screen to Stage: Hollywood Movies Sing on Broadway’; Michael Lynne, Co-chairman and Co-Chief Executive Officer for New Line Cinema; Mark Kaufman, Executive Vice President of Production and Theatre for New Line Cinema; composer, record producer, and conductor Jeanine Tesori; and producers Margo Lion and Barbara Whitman. Although the discussion is heavily focussed on the financial and legal issues around adapting a movie to a musical, the panellists also discuss the reasons for Broadway turning to Hollywood for inspiration, the differences between producing and creating a film and a Broadway musical, and how audiences and critics receive the shows. Lyon stated:

The stories today in the culture mainly come from films. Occasionally, they come from a book or a story, but mostly they come from films... Alan Jay Lerner said that it’s hard enough to write a musical: ‘don’t struggle with an original plot; find a plot that already exists’.20

Lynne, a Columbia law graduate, suggests that having a property (in this case a well-marketed film from which a musical can be derived) that can attract an audience in and of itself, regardless of the critics’ analysis, helps to entice investors:

Investors want something that they know... If you can say, imagine this movie, and we’re going to change it and put it on stage, its easier for the average person and the average investor to make that leap... there are so many entertainment choices for audiences or even for investors, so many things for people to do, that if you give them an anchor it just makes it easier for them.21

The panellists also discussed how Hollywood offers more opportunities to artists, as films reach a bigger and wider audience than Broadway musicals. The panellists were unanimous, however, that audiences and investors like familiarity.

A Daily Herald article by Scott C. Morgan, published six years later, titled “Screen-to-stage adaptations bring beloved film to life”, echoed some of the topics discussed by this panel:

20 “From Screen to Stage”, 467.
21 “From Screen to Stage”, 468.
These pop-culture films are accessible already because they have a recognisable branded name so they attract people to the theatre to see the franchise name, but it opens up their imagination to what can be done theatrically where things don’t always have to be so literal.22

On 1 August 2013, Patrick Healy from The New York Times wrote an article “Like the Movie, Only Different”, in which he suggests that although stage adaptations can be artistically creative, they have become, more often than not, ‘derivative cogs in brand machinery’:

What Hollywood is finding is that there are no easy formulas: No “Wicked 2” or other sequels; no sure fire star vehicles (Nathan Lane’s departure killed the “Addam’s Family” musical on Broadway); and no superhero action fluff that is easy to stage (hello, Spider-Man). In other words, don’t expect to see the biggest moneymakers go to Broadway anytime soon, studio executives say – no “Avatar: The Musical,” no singing Wookies.23

Healy suggests that although a film may be highly successful, the conversion of that film into a musical does not necessarily guarantee success – financial and/or critical. For example, Ghost: The Musical was described as a ‘thrill-free singing theme-park ride’ and a ‘dreary digital spectacle’ and only grossed just over US $13 million24; and the family-friend show, Elf: The Musical, was described as ‘tinsel[sic] in synthetic sentiment, performed with a cheer that borders on mania, and instantly forgettable’, and only grossed just over US $10 million.25 Ghost and Elf, the films, however, were highly financially success movies, grossing in excess of US $507 million and US $220 million worldwide, respectively.26

23 Healy, ”Like the Movie”, 1 August 2013.
In the same year as the panel discussion quoted above, Slate magazine published an article titled "From Screen to Stage: How to Turn a Movie into a Musical", in which the author, Mac Rogers puts forth three strategies for producing a successful screen-to-stage adaptation: pick a movie that has a strong story and strong characters; hire a new creative team who are unbiased and who are free to reconceptualise the story; and finally 'make your own moments’ — do not be afraid to be original and to have ‘surprises and fresh moments'. Movie critic Michael Phillips concurred. In his article for the Chicago Tribune, titled "Adapting Movies for the Stage is no Easy Trick – The Trick to Adapting Movies to the Stage: Know What to Change" Phillips interviewed Broadway producer, Thomas Viertel, who suggested that the successful movie adaptations are

the ones that depart from the movies in various and significant ways. The ones that seem to work less well tend to be more slavish, like "Dirty Dancing", essentially a recreation of the film on stage... It’s crucial you have a character whose own decisions and whose own passions drive the story forward. Not all movies are like that... And the great musicals, based on movies or otherwise, have an extra trick, I think. They show you that the character needs something they didn’t know they needed.28

It is also interesting to note that since 2000, seven movicals have won the Tony Award for Best Musical: The Producers, Thoroughly Modern Millie, Hairspray, Spamalot, Billy Elliot: The Musical, Once, and Kinky Boots. Evidently, movicals can be both critically and financially successful, whether the show is a literal or non-literally conversion. As Rogers notes, however, Broadway musicals are cheaper to mount than films but the tickets are far more expensive than a movie. The financial rewards, therefore, are potentially astronomical. However, the percentage of musicals that recoup invested money and make a profit on Broadway is low.

In Thomas S. Hischak’s book, *Through the Screen Door: What Happened to the Broadway Musical When It Went to Hollywood,* published in 2004, he very briefly addresses the conversion of films into musicals, suggesting that audiences who see a film-to-stage conversion are often left disappointed:

> The reason the movie was such a hit in the first place was in large part due to its skilful use of cinema techniques and memorable performances. But the stage version could offer neither of these. Theatre scenery cannot compete with the places movies can go, and, no matter how proficient the stage actors, they have to fight against the audience’s memory of Gene Kelly or Maurice Chevalier in the screen version.\(^{29}\)

Hischak points out that films (which are generally mass-produced) have an extensive audience who are familiar with the product, whereas, a ‘scaled-down’ musical version of a beloved film has a much smaller market.\(^{30}\)

**Movie Musical**

Like screen-to-stage conversions, the movie musical (i.e. film versions of Broadway shows) has also become increasingly popular in recent years. Hollywood has a long history of raiding Broadway for shows and talented artists, but in the last few years, this cross-pollination between Hollywood and Broadway appears to be increasing. As Hischak wrote in *Through the Screen Door,* which focuses upon stage-to-screen conversions,

> From the early silent days, the movies have always turned to Broadway for material, actors, directors, and later, songs. Musicals and talkies were made for each other... And so the pattern would continue for the next five decades until the filming of Broadway musicals became unprofitable in the 1970s. After a dozen colossal flops based on Broadway shows, Hollywood turned its back on the Great White Way.\(^{31}\)


\(^{30}\)Hischak, *Through the Screen Door,* 180.

\(^{31}\)Hischak, *Through the Screen Door,* vii-viii.
Although this topic is not the focus of my thesis, the growing popularity of movie musicals seems to suggest an increasingly close connection between Broadway and Hollywood.

Throughout the 2000s there were a number of financially successful (but often heavily criticised) movie musicals, including Chicago released in 2002; The Phantom of the Opera in 2004; Rent and The Producers in 2005; Dreamgirls in 2006; Sweeney Todd and Hairspray in 2007; Mamma Mia! in 2008; and Nine and Fame in 2009. The 2010s, however, have seen an increase in movie musicals, including Les Misérables and Rock of Ages released in 2012; and Annie, Into the Woods, The Last Five Years released in 2014; and La La Land (2016). In recent years there have also been a number of movie musicals, (mostly animated works) which are not based on musicals. This includes Happy Feet and Happy Feet Two (2006 and 2011), Tangled (2010), Frozen (2013), and Moana (2016).

According to Playbill—which has an entire section dedicated to upcoming screen adaptations—there are currently twenty-four movie musicals in development, including Wicked, Miss Saigon, Cats, American Idiot, Matilda, and Oliver! Interestingly, when the upcoming Matilda film is released, the story will have evolved from book (the story comes from a children's novel by Roald Dahl), to a film created in 1996, to a musical, to film version of the musical. The same can be said for Oliver!, which is based on Charles Dickens’ novel Oliver Twist of which there are multiple films.

The relationship between musicals and television is also strengthening. There are a number of television series that have produced special one-off musical episodes or included musical-inspired scenes. This includes, but is not limited to: Scrubs, That '70s Show, Grey's Anatomy, How I Met Your Mother, Hart of Dixie, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

In 2006 another connection was made between musical theatre and television, with the BBC reality show hosted by Graham Norton, How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria. The show featured performers auditioning for the role of Maria Von Trapp in Andrew Lloyd

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Webber's revival of *The Sound of Music* on West End. Following the same format, *Any Dream Will Do* was broadcast in 2007, in which they sought an actor for the role of Joseph in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*; and *I'd Do Anything*, a 2008 show that auditioned young adults for the upcoming revival of *Oliver!* In America, a number of musicals have been performed live and broadcast on national television, to varying success. This included *Sound of Music: Live*, *Peter Pan: Live*, *Grease: Live*, and *Hairspray: Live*. Such shows have the advantage of being performed live, but with an audience that would typically only be achieved by a film or television show.

In recent years, the relationship between different forms of media appears to have become increasingly close with films, television, musicals, staged shows, and even video games, becoming the inspiration for other creative works. One could argue that this interconnectedness is indicative of a creative or intellectual bankruptcy whereas or perhaps inspiration has simply changed from one source to another. For Broadway musicals, in particular, the connection between film and musical is becoming increasingly robust. In the past twenty-five years, the conversion of films into musicals has become a dominant practice for Broadway shows, reaching a peak in 2012 with 88% of shows on Broadway derived from films. As the conversions of films into musicals are financially safer enterprises—at a time when Broadway musicals are bigger and more expensive than ever—this new phenomena is likely to continue to dominate Broadway shows in the future.

In the rest of my thesis, I will examine the conversion of films into musicals, focusing on the *King Kong* musical as a case study. I begin with a summary and discussion of the original film, and its two most well-known remakes, from which the musical draws inspiration. This is followed by an analysis of the musical’s external and internal features, before ending with a summary of the show’s key characteristics that distinguish it from its contemporaries. In the process I will highlight and discuss features of the *King Kong* musical, which I believe, are exemplary of a shift in modern megamusicals towards creating a cinematic experience on stage by means of various unusual elements.
CHAPTER 3

The Origins of *King Kong*

In the 80 years since the original film was created numerous movies and television series centred on, or were inspired by, *King Kong*. As a result *Kong* has become one of the most famous and well-known characters ever produced: the figure of Kong is recognisable to most people in the Western world, even those who have not seen the films. The number of remakes, sequels, spoofs, and adaptations based on the original film suggest that Kong was (and still is) a topic of interest. *Kong* has the ability to resonate with contemporary audiences, regardless of the films’ popular and critical success or failure.

The latest manifestation of *Kong* was in the form of a musical, or “music theatre event”, as its creators dubbed it, which premiered in 2013 in Melbourne, Australia. In order to fully understand the cultural significance of the *King Kong* musical, we must first examine Kong’s long and rich history, predating the original 1933 film.

In this Chapter I will discuss the origins of the story of *Kong*, before turning to the original 1933 film, its creation, resonances in society, and its numerous interpretations. I shall then provide a brief overview of the 1976 and 2005 remakes of the film, discussing how the character of Kong has evolved over the decades, and how audiences have interpreted the character in relation to modern society. This context will assist in recognising the similarities and differences of the staged show compared to the preceding films.

Prior to the release of the 1933 film *King Kong*, wild animals, and in particular, simians were popular topics for books, films, and other forms of media. As Ted Gott and Kathryn Wier wrote (in a piece printed in the program for the *King Kong* musical), people have been fascinated by apes ever since the French-American explorer Paul de Chaillu published an account of the behaviour of gorillas in the 1860s:

> Prone to exaggerations, Du Chaillu’s best-selling books enthralled readers with theatrical accounts of frenzied gorillas killing hunters and chomping on their rifles like carrots. His writings spawned a new genre of gorilla adventure tales...as well as a plethora of gorilla villains in early cinema and comic books. In
cartoons, music hall acts and children’s books the gorilla now became the terrifying embodiment of the Victorian era’s contradictory fascination with and intense fear of nature. Reflecting humanity’s own dark inner nature, the gorilla also became a screen upon which to project theories of criminality and sexual phobias.1

This fascination with wild animals and primitive cultures lead to a film genre known as “jungle quests” that documented “aberrations of nature”. Toward the end of the 1920s, these documentaries began to feature fictitious plots, a style that was adopted by directors Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack in their 1933 film. As Cynthia Erb, author of Tracking King Kong, writes:

Although King Kong is in many ways a model example of the classical Hollywood text, it has a discernible pastiche-like quality, rooted in an assembly of a number of formulas and popular conventions that circulated in the 1920s and early 1930s.2

For their film, Cooper and Schoedsack wanted to imitate ‘authentic’ footage of wild animals and exotic places with a fictitious plot, a style they termed ‘natural dramas’.3 Unlike the numerous ‘jungle quests’ that came before King Kong, in which film crews would travel to remote areas in order to capture footage of wild animals, Cooper and Schoedsack were able to film most of the King Kong movie in Los Angeles, using stop motion animation for the creatures, an art perfected by Willis O’Brian with the help of Marcel Delgado who created the miniature models used in the films.4

The 1933 movie follows an American film crew, led by the intrepid director Carl Denham (a character based upon Cooper), who travels by ship to one of the last places on earth to remain unmapped: Skull Island. Surrounding the island is a colossal wall, separating the savage natives from antediluvian beasts. The natives (portrayed as dark-

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4 Morton, King Kong, 24.
skinned people wearing grass skirts and coconut bras with necklaces made of bones and feathers with white paint on their faces) perform human sacrifices to appease the wild Kong who they consider to be their god. After a failed attempt to swap the beautiful and blonde Ann Darrow (played by Fay Wray) for six of their native women, the indigenous peoples of the Island kidnap Ann in the dead of night from the ship, unbeknownst to Jack Driscoll – Ann’s love interest and the first mate of the ship – or the other crew members. Once returned to the island, the natives tie Ann between two posts just on the other side of the wall and call for Kong to collect his ‘wife’. As the natives beat drums and sing for Kong, the sound of trees falling and heavy footfalls upon the ground can be heard announcing Kong’s arrival. Kong releases Ann from her shackles and takes her into the forest where he battles a tyrannosaurus rex that had attempted to eat Ann. Having saved her from the dinosaur, Kong continues to carry Ann to his lair at the top of a mountain overlooking the island where an overgrown saurian beast emerges and bites Kong.

Meanwhile the crew members have gone beyond the colossal wall in search of Ann. After encountering numerous primordial animals, Jack is the only member left who is willing and able to rescue Ann. The surviving crew return to the boats to retrieve sleeping gas while Jack finds Ann atop of the mountain with Kong. While Kong tries to find Jack (who he heard creeping nearby) a pterodactyl attacks Ann. Her screams call Kong back to battle the dinosaur, giving Ann and Jack an opportunity to escape. The crew members, now waiting at the gate for Ann and Jack’s return, open the gates just as the duo come running toward the colossal wall. It is only once Ann and Jack are safely returned that Denham considers and mentions the possibilities of capturing and returning Kong to New York City. In his attempt to find Ann, Kong breaks through the gate in the wall then proceeds to destroy the village and eat many of the natives. When Kong arrives at the beach, the crew members release the gas bombs. Once Kong has succumbed to the gas, Denham announces, “We’re millionaires boys – I’ll share it with all of you!”: a statement that was repeated in the 2005 film, but was recontextualised to portray Denham’s deceitful and egotistical nature.

Back in New York City, Denham is excited about the attention and success of his new show: “The Eighth Wonder of the World”, billed as “Carl Denham’s Giant Monster”. The newly engaged Ann and Jack are present for the opening of the show, but Ann exclaims: “I don’t like to look at him [Kong]. It reminds me of that awful day on the Island”. Ann continues: “Of course we had to come when [Denham] said it would help the show. Do
you think we'll really make a lot of money? A group of reporters surround Ann, Jack, and Denham backstage, asking them about their adventure, prompting one of the reporters to suggest the title “Beauty and the Beast”. In a speech that has become almost as well known as the character of Kong, Denham introduces his show to the audience:

Ladies and gentlemen I am here tonight to tell you a very strange story. A story so strange that no one will believe it. But ladies and gentlemen, seeing is believing. And we, my partners and I, have brought back the living proof of our adventure. An adventure in which twelve of our party met horrible deaths. And now ladies and gentlemen, before I tell you any more I’m going to show you the greatest thing your eyes have ever beheld. He was a king and a god in the world he knew but now he comes to civilisation, merely a captive: a show to gratify your curiosity. Ladies and gentlemen, look at Kong, the Eighth Wonder of the World.

The curtain is lifted to reveal Kong chained on stage. As the photographers take pictures Kong breaks free of his chains, and escapes the theatre, causing havoc on the streets. Meanwhile Jack leads Ann to a hotel in the hopes that they will be safe from Kong. Kong, however, climbs a nearby tower, peering into windows, looking for Ann. In his attempts to find Darrow, Kong grabs women from their beds, but when he realises these women are not Ann, he drops them to their death on the streets far below. As fate would have it, Kong finds Ann and Jack in their room. Grabbing Ann, Kong continues to climb the building. An announcement over the radio states that Kong is headed for the Empire State Building, Jack and Denham, now with the local authorities, listen to the announcement, after which Jack suggests using planes to shoot down Kong.

In an extended scene – and perhaps the most well known scene in the film – Kong stands atop the Empire State Building, while the planes circle and shoot at him. Kong tries to grab at, and stop, the planes but he only succeeds in bringing down one of the four planes. The remaining planes eventually succeed in shooting and fatally wounding Kong. Kong picks up Ann one last time then returns her to the ledge before he finally lets go and falls to his death on the streets below. Ann (who is still petrified) is rescued by Jack

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who has climbed to the top of building to save her. On the streets below, amongst a
crowd surrounding the dead Kong, Denham tells the lieutenant "it wasn’t the airplanes
[that got Kong], it was beauty that killed the beast".

The score for the original film was composed by Max Steiner, whose work on King Kong
has received a great deal of academic attention and is almost invariable mentioned in
any discussion of the classic Hollywood film. Although Steiner’s entirely orchestral score
was similar in many ways to film scores of the time, his use of non-diegetic music and
leitmotifs to create a musico-dramatic language set the King Kong score apart from its
contemporaries, and helped establish a narrative style and technique of scoring.⁶ As
Kathryn Kalinak writes; ‘Kong’s monstrous presence strained the limits of Hollywood’s
standard of realism...The score became a crucial element in films of this genre where
music inherited the responsibility of creating the credible from the incredible’.⁷ Steiner’s
musico-narrative techniques included chromaticism to represent aggression, stable
tonality for romance, parallel fourths and fifths for primitivism or ‘others’, and leitmotifs
for the main characters.⁸ Kong’s leitmotif consisted of three chromatically descending
tones, which Steiner used extensively throughout the film, especially the final scenes
when Kong is atop the Empire State Building. The three chromatically descending tones
were also featured in Ann Darrow’s leitmotif, which suggested a connection between the
two characters or, as Peter Franklin asserts in his discussion of gender and music; "her'
music is really his'.⁹ In this film, Steiner also developed the click track, a device that
synchronised the visual and audio cues. The click track is still used today but with more
precision due to advancements in technology.¹⁰

The opening of King Kong on 2 March 1933 in New York City was a huge and grand
event. King Kong is the only film to premiere simultaneously at Radio City Hall and RKO
Roxy (which had a combined capacity for 10,000 seats): they were both packed for ten

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⁶ Mervyn Cooke, A History of Film Music (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 56.
⁷ Kathryn Kalinak, Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film, ed. 1, (Madison,
⁹ Peter Franklin, Seeing Through Music: Gender and Modernism in Classic Hollywood Film Scores
shows a day and earned $650,000. The night of the film’s release, an extravaganza was organised. An advertisement in *The New York Times* stated:

Stage shows as amazing as these mighty theatres..."Jungle Rhythms" — brilliant musical production! Entire singing and dancing ensemble of Music Hall and New Roxy! Spectacular dance rhythms by ballet corps and Roxyettes! Soloists, chorus, symphony, orchestras, company of 500!... Big enough for the two greatest theatres at the same time! (See Figure 6).

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12 “King Kong”, *New York Times*, 1 March 1933.
Figure 6: Advertisement placed in *The New York Times* on 1 March 1933.
Cooper and Schoedsack insisted that their film had no hidden meaning or agenda and was intended purely as entertainment, yet audiences, critics, and scholars, both past and present, have identified numerous parallels between the original *King Kong* film and contemporary society. Theories have abounded, not only about the 1933 *King Kong* film, but also each remake. The American film critic Danny Peary wrote:

*King Kong* is so rich in implications that few critics haven’t read added significance into it. It has been interpreted as: a parable about an innocent, proud country boy (probably a muscular, uneducated black) who is humbled and finally destroyed when he comes to the cold, cruel city; an indictment of 'bring 'em back alive' big-game hunters; a racist visualisation of the fears a white woman has about being abducted by a black...and a parable about the Great Depression...¹

These interpretations are so interlinked with the original film that any discussion of *King Kong* would be incomplete without examining these socio-political ideologies.

The most common interpretation of the original *King Kong* film is the perception of Kong as an embodiment of an African-American slave; Kong—a ‘primitive’ being—is forcibly taken from his native land (where he is a deity to the natives of Skull Island) to New York City, the acme of Western society, where he is chained and used as entertainment for the wealthy white society. When he escapes, he exerts his physical dominance over white New Yorkers, and kidnaps the innocent and virginal Ann Darrow. Bruce M. Tyler, author of the article “Racial Imagery in *King Kong*”, wrote:

In the 1933 version, Kong represented Blacks running amok in America. By climbing to the top of the Empire State Building, Kong challenged white power, science, and technology, for the Empire State was at that time the tallest building in the world and perhaps the greatest structural achievement of science...some commentators have interpreted the 1933 version as a symbolic attack on Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal programme and on his tacit support of integration.²

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¹ Danny Peary, “King Kong”, *King Kong Cometh*, 69.
² Bruce M. Tyler, “Racial Imagery in *King Kong*”, *King Kong Cometh*, 175.
When placed in its historical context, it is clear why the *King Kong* film was interpreted in this way. At the time of the film’s release in 1933, America had just experienced the stock market crash of 1929, which triggered the Great Depression. In response, the Franklin D. Roosevelt government enacted the New Deal initiatives, which began in 1933 (the same year the *King Kong* film was released) providing relief, recovery, and reform. Although the aid was available to all citizens, African Americans were still ‘last hired, first fired’, making race relations between black and white Americans particularly tense. At the same time, ‘Jim Crow’ segregation laws were still enforceable and remained law until 1965. African Americans were regarded as second-class citizens, intellectually and culturally inferior to white peoples. This is particularly evident in the media, in which African Americans were often portrayed as monkeys:

In Western culture, the literary and historical tendency to identify blacks with ape-like creatures is quite clear and has been well-documented. A willed misreading of Linnaean classification and Darwinian evolution helped buttress an older European conception (tracing from as early as the early 16th century) that blacks and apes, kindred denizens of the ‘jungle’ are phylogenetically closer and sexually more compatible than blacks and whites.  

At the same time, shows on Broadway featured blackface minstrelsy, which depicted African American's as dim-witted and simple.

Many of the interpretations of the original film, however, arose long after its release. Interpretations and analyses of the numerous *King Kong* films, in particular the 1933 movie, are continually produced by film critics, academics, and fans. In 2005, a book titled *King Kong Cometh* was published, featuring numerous articles analysing the *King Kong* films, in particular the 1933 film. One of the articles in this book, titled “Beauties and Beasts: The Eroticism of King Kong”, suggests that because Kong can be perceived as a representation of an African-American man, any desire that Ann might harbour for him would be considered socially taboo, thus heightening our excitement in their pairing:

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If black flesh upon white is a social taboo, it is probably the ultimate socio-sexual fantasy among men and women of both races. This may explain at least a part of our timeless fascination with the 'Beauty and Beast' aspect of a motion picture described alternately as a horror film, an adventure thriller, and a romantic fable.  

A slightly different interpretation, also centred around repressed sexual desire, suggests that almost the entire 1933 film is portraying our inner sexual desires, or as the author writes, '[expressing] the raging beast within each of us'. It is also suggested that Kong is Denham's alter ego who, unlike himself, is able to get close to Ann:

Kong, I believe, is a manifestation of Denham's subconscious...Denham conjures up Kong as a surrogate to battle Driscoll for Ann’s love and to perform sexually with her when he has never been willing (or able) to have a sexual encounter himself. Although young and virile, misogynist Denham has travelled to the far corners of the earth with an all-male crew to avoid intimate liaisons because he believes women will strip him of his masculinity...Kong is Denham’s female-lusting side – his alter ego, which he keeps in the recesses of his mind, as remotely located as Skull Island, behind a figurative great wall.

Following the success of King Kong, a number of remakes, sequels and spoofs were created (see Table 1). Schoedsack went on to direct a comedic sequel to the original (also released in 1933) titled The Son of Kong, in which Carl Denham, a main character of the film, returns to Skull Island and meets Kong’s much friendlier (and white) son. In 1949, Cooper and Schoedsack directed a Kong spin-off titled Mighty Joe Young, which also featured Robert Armstrong, the original Carl Denham. The film was remade in 1998, starring Charlize Theron and Bill Paxton. Also in 1998, an animated musical film was created that went straight to video, titled The Mighty Kong, with music by film and Broadway musical composers Robert B. Sherman and Richard M. Sherman. Because the film is aimed at young children, the ending was altered so that Kong does not die from his fall from the Empire State Building, but is merely injured.

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4 Steve Vertlieb, “ Beauties and Beasts: The Eroticism of King Kong”, King Kong Cometh, 74-75.
5 Vertlieb, “ Beauties and Beasts”, King Kong Cometh, 74.
6 Danny Peary, “King Kong”, King Kong Cometh, 70.
Inspired by the popularity of Kong in Japan, director Ishirô Honda created the character Godzilla, another overgrown creature, this time a lizard, that supposedly gets its names from a combination of the Japanese words for ‘gorilla’ and ‘whale’. Honda directed the films Godzilla (1954), Godzilla, King of the Monsters (1956), King Kong vs. Godzilla (1963), and finally he returned to Kong with King Kong Escapes (1967). The popularity of Godzilla has been rekindled with American remakes of the film released in 1998 and 2014.

The two most well known remakes of King Kong were the 1976 film directed by John Guillermin, and the 2005 film directed by Peter Jackson.

**Table 1: King Kong films**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>King Kong</th>
<th>1933</th>
<th>Directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Son of Kong</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Directed by Ernest B. Schoedsack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Klunk</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Spoof of the original film.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mighty Joe Young</td>
<td>1949</td>
<td>Director by Ernest B. Schoedsack. Written by Merian C. Cooper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Konga</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Rip-off of original film that is set in London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Kong vs. Godzilla</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Directed by Ishirô Honda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarzan and King Kong</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Sequel to the 1962 Bollywood King Kong film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Kong Escapes</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Directed by Ishirô Honda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King of Kong Island</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Directed by Roberto Mauri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mighty Gorga</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Rip-off of the original film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Kong</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Directed by John Guillermin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queen Kong</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Spoof of the Guillermin film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mighty Peking Man</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Rip-off of both the Guillermin film and Mighty Joe Young.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donkey Kong</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Video game created by Shigeru Miyamoto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Kong Lives</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Directed by John Guillermin (Sequel to the 1976 film)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mighty Joe Young</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Directed by Ron Underwood</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
King Kong (1976)

The 1976 *King Kong* film is loosely based upon the original movie, but is set in the year it was made, unlike the other films and musical, which are all set in the 1930s. The role of Carl Denham has become Fred Wilson who works for an oil company (Petrox) that is attempting to locate an unmapped island they believe has high levels of petroleum. Jack Prescott, the Jack Driscoll character from the original film, played by Jeff Bridges, is a primate palaeontologist from Princeton University who boards the ship illegally as it leaves from Surabaya, Indonesia, on its quest. Jack brings with him historical tales about this mysterious island and its wild beasts. Refusing to allow Jack to travel for free, Fred appoints him as the ship’s official photographer.

Ann, who calls herself Dwan in this film, played by Jessica Lange, is found unconscious lying on a raft afloat at sea, a survivor from a sunken yacht from which a mayday distress call was heard the night before. When Dwan regains consciousness she informs the captain and Fred that ‘Henry’ (a fellow passenger on the yacht) discovered her and was going to film her in a movie to be shown in Hong Kong. Dwan has been described as a Marilyn Monroe-like starlet: she is portrayed as a flirtatious, sexy, slightly ditzy and spoilt blonde woman with an almost childlike energy, who is frequently in a state of undress and posing in suggestive ways. Her relationship with Jack is established very early on, but upon returning Kong to America, Dwan and Jack have different opinions about Kong's exploitation in Fred Wilson's money-making spectacle: Jack opposes the idea, whereas Dwan is willing to be a part of the show, as she is motivated by fame.

Unlike the original film in which Ann is portrayed as a damsel in distress, Dwan is more

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7 Robert F. Wilson, Jr., “They Killed King Kong”, *King Kong Cometh*, 148.
vivacious and spirited: beating against Kong’s lip and yelling for him to put her down and to hurry up and eat her if that is what he intends.

The 1976 film dedicates more time to portraying the relationship between Dwan and Kong than the 1933 film. Their relationship is lustful and sexual, rather than simply protective or driven by curiosity. This is most evident in a scene that occurs shortly after Kong kidnaps Dwan; he carries and places her under a waterfall so that she can wash away the mud on her clothes. This provides a perfect opportunity for Jessica Lange to get wet, causing Kong’s eyes to widen in lust. Kong then attempts to dry Dwan by blowing on her, to which she tosses her head back and shakes out her blonde hair (see Figure 7).

![Figure 7: Jessica Lange as Dwan being held by Kong as she washes the mud from her clothes.](image)

Like the original film, the 1976 movie, directed by John Guillermin, had an extensive advertising campaign and was much discussed in the print media. The film reportedly cost US $24 million to create, the most expensive film at that time. A substantial portion of this cost went to legal fees, as producer Dino De Laurentiis was sued by Universal studio who claimed they owned the rights to the film. This particular legal battle was covered extensively in print media, as two other studios also planned to film a remake at the same time. Another substantial portion of the cost went to the failed attempt to create a 40-foot, 6-and-a-half tonne mechanical ape, which was discarded in favour of a man in an ape suit after just one week, due to constant malfunctioning.

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Like the original film, the 1976 movie resonated with its current society. In 1973, three years before the film was released, the U.S. experienced their first oil crisis. This contributed, at least in part, to the stock market crash of 1973–74. When placed in the context of these events, the changes made to the 1976 film take on greater significance. It is no coincidence that the character Fred Wilson works for a large oil company that has little regard for others or the environment in its quest for financial gain. This portrayal of the greedy oil magnate is linked with the underlying Age of Aquarius-like message in the film calling for greater environmental awareness and a more holistic view of the world. Charles Grodin, who played Fred Wilson stated:

King Kong is a wonderful theatrical presentation about the rape of the environment. Kong is really the pure, natural animal when he is in his jungle habitat. His fate is to be exploited by men who put him in bondage and carry him off to a hostile environment... If you had gone out to make a film about how man has exploited and polluted his streams and atmosphere, and did it in a documentary style, no one would come to see the film. But in doing King Kong, I realise I had a chance to work in a film with the potential of being seen by more people than any other film in the history of the business.9

These sentiments are personified in the character of Jack Prescott, who acts as an environmental activist, anthropologist, and defender for both the native tribe of Skull Island and Kong.

Another significant difference between this and the other films is that when Kong escapes in New York City, the action does not centre on the Empire State Building, but rather the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre (see Figure 8). The towers are similar in shape to two stone towers that are located in the crater on Skull Island, which was Kong’s lair. Kong seeks refuge there, as the only place that reminds him of home. The Twin Towers were the modern equivalent of the Empire State Building; both were only recently completed when the films were released, and both structures were the tallest buildings in New York City. However, given the stock market crash of 1973–74, as well as the inclusion of an oil company into the narrative, the World Trade Centre has significant connotations. When Kong reaches the top of the Twin Towers, soldiers attack

Kong with jets of fire, causing him to jump from one tower to the other. There the army send in helicopters armed with machine guns that fire and ultimately kill Kong, who falls dead upon the top of the tower before rolling over the edge and falling to the ground far below. It is here, next to Kong’s dead body, that Dwan finally gets her fame as she is surrounded by photographers watching her cry for Kong and scream for Jack (see Figure 9).

![Image](image1.png)

**Figure 8:** The DVD cover for the 1976 *King Kong* film featuring Kong astride the Twin Towers with helicopters circling him.

![Image](image2.png)

**Figure 9:** Jessica Lange as Dwan standing next to Kong who has just fallen from the top of the Twin Towers.

Interestingly, after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001, an image emerged in which Kong yet again stands astride the Twin Towers with the plane
heading towards the buildings and the caption “Where was King Kong when we needed him?” Any number of interpretations could be derived from this image, but what is evident, however, is that the Kong remains strongly associated with New York City and that this caption turns to King Kong as a saviour for the victims of the terrorist attack, rather than the instigator of terror, as he was typically portrayed (see Figure 10).

![Figure 10: King Kong astride the Twin Towers with one of the hi-jacked planes in his hand and the other heading towards the buildings. The caption reads "Where was KING KONG when we needed him?"](image)

The 1976 film has also drawn some debate as to the parallels with the Vietnam War, which ended just one year before the film’s release:

> The machine guns that destroy Kong—helicopter gunships—are presented as blatant reminders of the most recent testing ground for the products of the military-industrial complex: Vietnam... when the bullets rip into the body we can’t help recalling My Lai and similar massacres of Vietnamese innocents.  

Despite its differences to the original film, the 1976 remake also uses the narrative of Kong as a means of providing commentary on contemporary society, in this case environmental damage, the Vietnam War, and the affect of the stock market crash. The

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10 Image used in multiple social media, but was discussed at length in Ted Gournelos and Viveca Greene, eds., *Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America* (USA: University of Mississippi, 2011), 37–38.

narrative was altered where necessary to fit this underlying commentary; something that can be seen in every new depiction of Kong.

King Kong (2005)

Peter Jackson's 2005 version of *King Kong* is a recreation of the original film that uses modern technology to create a more realistic Kong and to generate other special CGI effects. There are two scenes in the 2005 film that were not in the original movie: first, a *Jurassic Park*-like scene that features herds of brontosauruses stampeding through a narrow valley as they are chased by tyrannosaurus rex and second, a scene that features overgrown bugs and giant spiders. This second scene was supposedly included in the original film, but was deleted as it was deemed too scary for audiences. There is only one other major difference from the original film: the character of Jack Driscoll is not the first mate of the ship, but rather the scriptwriter for Denham’s movie. Driscoll is depicted as a gifted writer who works for the Federal Theatre Project, a subsection of the New Deal initiative that gained attention for government censorship and interference. Consequently, a character called Hayes plays the first mate. There are also a number of secondary characters that have either been added or whose roles were expanded from the original film. They include a character by the name of Jimmy (performed by Jamie Bell) who was found by Hayes as a stowaway on the ship and who has a mysterious past that is never fully explained. Bruce Baxter, the male lead performer in Denham’s film has also been written into the *King Kong* movie, as has a man by the name of Preston who is Denham’s assistant. Preston is somewhat of a moral compass for Denham, constantly reminding him of the right action to take.

The 2005 remake includes numerous references to the original film and to various performers from the era, including Mae West, Myrna Loy, Clara Bow, and Fay Wray, who played the role of Ann Darrow in the original film. Denham (Jack Black) even jokes that Fay is now working on an RKO film directed by Cooper. Jackson also makes numerous references to the previous films. The ship upon which the crew sail to Skull Island is named Venture Surabaya: Venture was the name of the ship in the 1933 films, and Surabaya was the Indonesian city from which the crew left on their voyage in the 1976 film. The music used in Jackson’s film is mostly derived from the score for the 1933 film written by Max Steiner. Howard Shore—the composer for Jackson's most

famous and successful film trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*—originally intended to write the score, but due to disagreements with Jackson, Shore pulled out of the project. As a result, James Newton Howard was employed to write the score instead. Howard included many of Steiner’s original compositions, including “Fanfares No. 1, 2, 3”, “The Sailors”, “The Aeroplanes”, “Elevated Sequence”, “Jungle Dance”, “The Escape”, and “The Aboriginal Sacrifice Dance”. The 2005 film also uses popular songs “Bye Bye Blackbird” and “I’m Sitting On Top of the World”, which were both written in the mid-1920s.  

Although the 2005 film has very little dialogue, character development and the relationship between Ann and Kong are strongest in this film. Ann is initially fearful of Kong on Skull Island until she witnesses a gentler side to him. When Kong escapes from the theatre, Ann seeks him; she does not run and hide like she does in the 1933 film, suggesting a bond between the two characters that was not in the original film. When the two characters are atop the Empire State Building, Ann attempts to defend Kong from the shooting planes, unlike in the original film, where she is simply a witness to the action. Despite the more developed characters, the underlying socio-political commentary remains subordinate to the spectacle of the film.  

In the 2005 film, Kong (played by the actor Andy Serkis) was based on the behaviour of a silverback gorilla, an animal known for being fiercely protective of the females and young in its band. In the 1933 and 1976 films, Kong walked erect and his movements were very human. In the 2005 film Kong remains as realistically animal-like as possible. He does, however, demonstrate intelligence and emotional reactions, which could be interpreted as being more human.  

The transformation or evolution of Kong and other characters from the original film to the 2005 movie has itself become a topic of interest for academics. Dr Tracy Stephenson Shaffer, an academic in performance studies, stated at a TEDx talk in 2013

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13 Peter Jackson, dir., *King Kong* (2005), DVD.  
14 Stefan Lovgren, “King Kong Island Home is Pure Fantasy Ecology Experts Say”, *National Geographic*, 14 December 2005,  
that Kong, as an icon, has evolved over time from a monster to be feared to a Christ-like figure and an image of our maltreatment of minorities and ‘others’\textsuperscript{15}:

King Kong wasn’t just a big monkey, the tale wasn’t just a tale about the mysterious primordial world and modern civilisation... we learned that as an icon, Kong and his tale...[is] always [about] a journey to an unknown place, [it] always involving a human being as the primate’s impossible love interest, [and it] always end[s] in chaos, death or disaster. As an icon Kong can represent different societal concerns at different times in history and he has the potential to communicate those concerns in accessible and entertaining ways... He is a monster, he is cinema itself, he is a victim of colonisation and capitalism and a symbol in slavery, he is nature versus culture, he is a gender critique, he is a Christ figure and an advocate for difference, and he is a post-modern mascot.\textsuperscript{16}

The legend of King Kong comes not just from the numerous films, remakes, spoofs, and rip-offs, but also from its embedment in society as a representation of wider socio-political concerns. Despite Cooper and Schoedsack’s insistence, Kong was, and still is, not just a giant monkey: he is the embodiment of the voiceless ‘other’ – the wild animals and ‘primitive’ cultures that are exploited for economic gain in the western world, the destruction of the environment and its need for preservation, and an example of our past actions and a warning to the Western world of the effect of our exploitive nature and our disregard for others.

With each retelling, the narrative of King Kong has been reinvented to appeal to modern sensibilities. The King Kong musical is no exception: like its predecessors, the musical has been moulded and shaped to facilitate a discussion about socio-political issues that are of concern to modern audiences.

\textsuperscript{15} I use the word “evolution” in this dissertation to suggest a change, transition, adaption, or development, not to suggest an improvement, progression, or advancement. The term has been included because of its use in Dr Tracey Shaffer Stephenson TEDx talk and in the book King Kong Cometh: The Evolution of a Great Ape, one of my main sources for this thesis.

\textsuperscript{16} Talk by Dr Tracy Stephenson Shaffer at TEDx on May 2013.
In 2013, eighty years after the original film was released, *King Kong* transferred from the big screen to the stage, in the form of a musical or ‘music theatre event’ (as it was dubbed by its creators). Although the story is quintessentially American, the show was created by a mostly Australian team, and premiered to Australian audiences. In this Chapter, I will discuss the creation of *King Kong: A Music Theatre Event* including the development process, the members of the creative team, and the extensive marketing of *King Kong*, drawing on Sternfeld’s theories of a megamusicals.

The developmental process that led to the creation of Kong—who is part animatronic and part marionette—began in 2008 with Sonny Tilders, the creative director of The Creatures Technology Company, and Carmen Pavlovic, the CEO of Global Creatures. Global Creatures, which produced the shows *Walking with Dinosaurs The Arena Spectacular, How to Train Your Dragon, War Horse* and *Strictly Ballroom*, Creatures Technology (previously known as Global Creatures Technology) is a subdivision of Global Creatures Group and is well known for creating the spectacular technology in the aforementioned shows. Before the musical could be developed, Pavlovic and Tilders had to determine if building a very large yet functional puppet that could move about the stage and be believable to audiences was even possible. The technology was created and developed by Tilders and his team at Creatures Technology in their West Melbourne workshop.

Kong stood at over 6 metres tall and weighs 1.1 tonnes; the Regent theatre had to be reinforced with over 65 tonnes of steel so that Kong could be moved about the stage as well as being lifted and housed in the rafters. As the *King Kong: Live on Stage* website revealed, Kong is ‘operated by a combination of hydraulics, pre-set automation and manual manipulation’ by a team of aerialists/puppeteers with circus training,

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nicknamed “The King’s Men”, who remained visible when on stage. With the help of puppetry director Peter Wilson, the King’s Men learnt to operate the large marionette and give it life with subtle movements that replicated breathing and shifting of weight. Ten King’s Men move Kong about the stage, while three, located in a booth at the back of the theatre, operate controls that move Kong’s eyebrows, nose, upper and lower lips, jaw, the corners of his mouth, and upper and lower eyelids. Kong’s facial expressions were produced by fifteen industrial servo-motors and two hydraulic cylinders. These various forms of technology gave Kong the ability to roar, laugh, grunt, sleep, snarl, and beat his chest throughout the show.

If the construction, animatronics, puppetry and mere size of Kong were not impressive enough, the entire backdrop of the stage was a concave 27-metre long by 8.4-metre high LED screen illuminated by 4.5 million individual pixels. The screen displayed various words (often a lyric from a song) as well as flashing lights that mirror and reinforced the action on the stage. Creatures Technology developed motion sensitive technology that monitored movement on the stage and adjusted the lighting on the screen accordingly. Due to the complexity of Kong, the bump-in and rehearsal process took six months, exceeding any other musical in Australia.

Although Melbourne was effectively an ‘out of town tryout’ for King Kong (or ‘just a blip’ as the producer stated), Pavlovic and Creatures Technology invested significant time and money in an extensive advertising campaign to create what Sternfeld terms a ‘cultural event’, with advertisements saturating the city of Melbourne. The creative and media teams of King Kong inundated potential audience members with television advertisements, an active Facebook page, YouTube podcasts and clips, and advertisements around the city of Melbourne as well as extensive information on their own website dedicated to the musical event. The aggressive advertising for King Kong followed in the tradition established by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Cameron Mackintosh for their hit megamusicals such as The Phantom of the Opera, and is on par with, if not more extensive than, other internationally successful megamusicals, such as Wicked and The Lion King. These international megamusicals are well established and are extremely

4 King Kong: Live on Stage, http://kingkongliveonstage.com/, (site discontinued).
financially successful shows that have big budgets and can afford an extensive advertising campaign. *King Kong*, on the other hand, was partially reliant on funding by the Victorian State Government, who in return expected the tourism generated by the show to inject approximately $45 million into the state economy.\(^8\) The saturation of advertisements created a sense of anticipation for the opening of the show, which was not only advertised around the city of Melbourne, but became part of the Melbourne identity during its run.

Like the original megamusicals, the advertising for *King Kong* began long before the show premiered. The extensive advertisements around the city of Melbourne included a media launch eight months before preview performances began held at the Regent Theatre for local and international media. The Kong puppet was not unveiled at the launch; however, three songs were performed for the audience: "Colossus", "Rise", and "Full Moon Lullaby". In addition to this, a recognisable logo and image (see Figure 11 and Figure 12) were placed on the sides of trams, at bus stops and on flags along Collins Street (the street in which the Regent Theatre is located). The logo featured the title of the show, the Empire State Building, Kong, the moon, and Ann. The silhouette of Ann standing below Kong in the logo is strongly reminiscent of the appearance of Ann in the original 1933 film and its 2005 remake in which Ann is dressed in a 3/4-length coat with cloche hat, even though, in the musical, however, Ann never wears a hat, and only briefly wears a jacket. Trams, flags, and billboards are fairly customary forms of advertising in Melbourne for similarly big-budget musicals, but the marketing for *King Kong* extended well beyond these traditional methods. For example, the *King Kong* website featured background information about the *King Kong* story, films, and relevant historical details; discussions and interviews about the development process of the musical; interviews with collaborators of the show; biographical details for various members of the creative team (including the artists who contributed music and/or lyrics to the show); and ‘sneak peak’ film clips of the musical. Furthermore, the marketing team arranged for a giant paw to be placed atop of Melbourne’s tallest building, Eureka Tower, and had an actress sit in the palm in a re-enactment of the musical and films (see Figure 13). The promotional stunt received significant attention in the media as it was flown by helicopter over the city to Eureka tower where it was installed. The paw was then relocated inside the Eureka Tower at Eureka Tower

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\(^8\) Dewi Cook, "Dream Realised as King Kong Comes to Life", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 May 2013.
Skydeck 88, where patrons could have their photo taken sitting in the paw, superimposed against a Melbourne backdrop.

**Figure 11**: Logo for *King Kong* musical, complete with the Empire State Building, King Kong, Ann Darrow, and the moon (a reference to the song "Full Moon Lullaby").

**Figure 12**: Image of Kong used in advertisements at tram and bus stops and flags along Collins Street.
Like most modern megamusicals, *King Kong* partnered with various companies, offering discounts and packages. These included Virgin Airlines with whom they offered packages that included tickets to see the show; Honda, who placed a car at the entrance of the Regent Theatre, where patrons could complete a form to go in the draw to win the car, as well as a *King Kong* app in which consumers could scan a QR code with their smartphones to go in the draw for a car; and N2 Extreme Gelato with whom they created the “Kong Me” gelato, offering consumers the chance to win free tickets to the show if they posted their picture on Instagram (see Figure 14).

![Image from N2 Extreme Gelato featuring the new "Kong Me" flavour, advertised on Instagram.](image)

*Figure 14:* Image from N2 Extreme Gelato featuring the new "Kong Me" flavour, advertised on Instagram.⁹

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⁹ "King Kong Stage", Facebook, [https://www.facebook.com/KingKongStage](https://www.facebook.com/KingKongStage), (site discontinued).
The online advertisements were equally extensive, with *YouTube* episodes and clips available, including ‘Behind the Scenes’ podcasts featuring interviews with collaborators of the show (also available on the *King Kong* website), and the ‘Music of Kong’ featuring snippets of eight songs in the show.\textsuperscript{10}

The extensive Facebook updates included statuses reminding subscribers of student rush tickets, a countdown of the weeks before the show closed, extensive 'King Kong Shoot & Share' photos featuring audience members standing beside the King Kong poster outside the Regent Theatre, 'KK Facts' about the show, details for a *King Kong* costume exhibition, and links to newspaper articles (including the Helpmann Awards for which *King Kong* was nominated for Best New Australian Work). There were also video clips including television segments about the show, various charitable performances in which members of the *King Kong* cast and/or creative members were involved, a 'Q and A' series with original director Daniel Kramer, film clips featuring messages from members of the cast, and, and quotes from celebrities who saw the show (including one by internationally recognised Australian, Geoffrey Rush). Fans could also download a free 'King's Men Calendar' as well as the song "A Simple Prayer", performed by Esther Hannaford (see Figure 15).

\textbf{Figure 15:} Advertisement placed on the *King Kong Live on Stage* Facebook page wishing followers a Merry Christmas and offering a free download of the song "A Simple Prayer" performed by Esther Hannaford who plays Ann Darrow.

\textbf{Figure 16:} Advertisement placed on the *King Kong Live on Stage* Facebook page.

Typically, cast recordings of megamusicals are released before the show opens, as a form of advertisement for the show as well as a separate commercial product.\textsuperscript{11} It is unclear what the motivation was for releasing this song towards the end of the \textit{King Kong’s} run in Melbourne. As the online advertisements became increasingly aggressive and direct at this time, it is possible that ticket sales were slowing towards the end of the shows run, and the release of this song was a final push to sell the remaining tickets to the show.

To maintain its omnipresence in Melbourne, \textit{King Kong} was routinely associated with local and contemporary events such as the Australian Football League (AFL) Grand Final, the 2013 Australian Federal election, the annual Melbourne Cup horse racing event, as well as festivities such as Halloween and the buzz around Christmas shopping (see Figure 17, Figure 18, Figure 19, Figure 20, Figure 21, Figure 22).

\textbf{Figure 17:} Front page of \textit{The Herald Sun} featuring Kong supporting the local football team, Hawthorn, in the AFL Grand Final.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Figure 18:} The caption reads: “Kong the musical hits Melbourne” and “Five Minutes Mr Kong”.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} Cast recordings of musicals are not as prevalent in Australia as they are in the United States.

\textsuperscript{12} Cartoon by Mark Knight, \textit{Herald Sun}, 26 September 2013.

\textsuperscript{13} Knight, \textit{Herald Sun}, 16 June 2013.
In the final weeks of the show two images were posted on the Facebook page featuring Kong centre stage with a Melbourne backdrop to one side of Kong and New York City on the other (see Figure 23 and Figure 24). Both images featured the Empire State Building in New York City (the building that has become synonymous with the *King Kong* story) and Melbourne’s tallest building, the Eureka Tower. Various other tourist destinations

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14 Cartoon by Mark Knight, *Facebook*, 5 September 2013, (site discontinued).
in Melbourne are also featured including the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) and the Arts Centre spire. In New York is the Statue of Liberty: a prominent feature in the musical (discussed further in Chapter 5).

Figure 23: Kong at the Regent Theatre. The backdrop features Melbourne to Kong's right and New York City to his left.  

Figure 24: Kong at the Regent Theatre. The backdrop features Melbourne to Kong's right and New York City to his left.

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19 King Kong: Live on Stage, (site discontinued).
The extensive and aggressive advertising of King Kong, along with its other ‘mega’ elements, helped launch the show into megamusical status. Not only was King Kong a cultural event—a ‘must-see’ show—but also became part of the Melbourne identity. He shared in major sporting, cultural, and political events and became a main attraction for tourists. During the show’s run, Kong was omnipresent, with his image splashed across a range of media, including newspapers and television, on Melbourne’s public transport, and at the top of Melbourne’s tallest building. The saturation of advertisements created a sense of anticipation and ‘hype’ about the opening of a show, so much so, that the negative reviews by critics largely ceased to matter as they were eclipsed by various marketing ploys.
CHAPTER 5

Synopsis of King Kong: A Music Theatre Event

After five years of design and manufacture, and six months of rehearsals, King Kong: A Music Theatre Event held its world premiere at the Regent Theatre in Melbourne, Australia, in June 2013. Producer, Carmen Pavlovic, and the original director, Daniel Kramer, envisioned a ‘unique’ but ‘spectacular’ show that featured advanced technology, the likes of which have not been seen before in Australia, or on Broadway. The show was essentially a retelling of the original 1933 film, but featured many modern elements, including a score that mixed 1920s and ’30s hits with contemporary popular songs, and a book laden with subtexts.

As this new work has not yet been performed outside of Australia, this Chapter provides a detailed synopsis that includes the placement of musical numbers, together with descriptions of the show by the creative team when possible.

Synopsis: Act 1

Much like the 2005 film, the musical begins with a discussion between the hubristic film director Carl Denham (dubbed "the dreamer" by the creators of the show and described by Kramer as a 'motor-mouth, over passionate, verbose director' and a 'megalomaniac, chip-on-the-shoulder entrepreneur' by writer Craig Lucas) and the voice of the producer, Weston, who discuss Denham's newest film, with Weston insisting, 'there must be blondes!'

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21 A detailed synopsis has been provided in Chapter 5 and the lyrics are in the appendix. Please note some of the lyrics in the appendix are incomplete as they were not available at the time of submission.


In his search for his (blonde) leading lady, Denham performs “Hunting Season”, singing ‘When I see her I will know’. The *King Kong: Live on Stage* website described this song as ‘An 11-minute opening number featuring the full company which follows Carl’s search for his leading lady. It travels choreographically from period showbiz Busby Berkeley to contemporary jazz and acrobatics’. This musical number incorporates the 1928 song “Sweethearts on Parade”, performed by a barbershop quartet. The company, who represent the citizens of New York City, are dressed in black, white, and grey clothing, almost certainly a reference to the black and white film era when the original *King Kong* movie was produced (see Figure 25).

![Figure 25: Carl Denham and the company performing "Hunting Season", which includes the 1920s song "Sweethearts on Parade".](image)

The dishevelled character Cassandra interrupts Denham’s song to warn both him and the audience of impending doom (“Prophecy 1”, see Figure 26). Like her Greek mythological counterpart, Cassandra has the ability to foretell the future, but her predictions are ignored. The inclusion of the character Cassandra was an unusual choice as she was not present in any of the preceding films and is the only character in the musical based on a Greek myth. Her presence, history, or motivations are never

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25 Carmen Lombardo composed “Sweethearts on Parade” with lyrics by Charles Newman. The song was made famous when Louis Armstrong recorded it in 1930.
explained in the musical and her prophecies add little to the narrative. As Vito Mattarelli wrote for *Australian Stage*, ‘the adding of the character Cassandra was another unnecessary idea. With little to do and dressed in a costume that seemed more relevant to *Wicked*, one was left bewildered by her presence’.26

**Figure 26**: Carl Denham and Cassandra.

Dismissing Cassandra and her prophecies, the men of the Company break into the Depression-era song “Brother Can You Spare A Dime?” as they queue to receive food rations. Ann Darrow (dubbed by the creators of *King Kong* as “the hero” and described by Lucas as a ‘young girl—probably not from the most cultured background—who wants to run away from her past’27) joins the men, but is pushed aside and misses out on rations causing her to burst into the melancholic song “What’s It Gonna Take?” written for the musical by Canadian songwriter and musician Sarah McLachlan. As this song was written by an international artist, Global Creatures were keen to include a musical analysis in their *School Resource Pack*, explaining...

Simple string orchestration and arpeggiated broken chords accompany the vocal line for most of the song. Musical simplicity is adopted specifically to convey Ann's character and innocence at this point in the story... The music's function also serves to depict her as an inexperienced, naive girl from the country. The

26 Vito Mattarelli, "King Kong, Global Creatures", *Australian Stage*, 16 June 2013.

uncomplicated, seemingly unstructured chordal accompaniment helps to convey her emotional state... The song is almost like one long question and as the final chord is left suspended, without any resolution, both Ann and the audience is left still searching for the answer to these questions.\textsuperscript{28}

As in the 1933 and 2005 films, in a moment of desperation, Ann considers stealing an apple from a fruit merchant, but just as she is about to take the apple, the vendor catches and scolds her. This scene is performed in slow motion, a filmic process used to emphasise the gravity of Ann’s actions. Upon seeing Ann, Denham believes she would be perfect for his film – he pays the vendor for the apple and attempts to ask her to be a part of his project, but before he is able to do so, a group of men attack Ann and try to steal her violin. The men chase Ann around New York City and into a theatre where a group of female performers are dancing on stage in red glittered and feathered costumes with red lighting ("I Wanna Be Loved By You",\textsuperscript{29} see Figure 27).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.8\textwidth]{figure27.png}
\caption{Female company performing "I Wanna be Loved By You".}
\end{figure}

Ann tries to join in with the dancers, but fails miserably. A police officer captures the men chasing Ann and Denham is finally able to ask her to join his project.

\textsuperscript{29}"I Wanna Be Loved By You" was composed by Herbert Stothart and Harry Ruby with lyrics by Bert Kalmar for the 1928 musical Good Boy. The song was made famous when Marilyn Monroe performed it for the 1959 film musical Some Like It Hot.
The set is cleared, and now gently rocks back and forth like a ship at sea. The timid Ann accompanies Denham to his boat, still wary and unsure about her current circumstances, even though Denham assures her that he only wants to help her and means her no harm. He teaches her his mantra, ‘Hope, hope, hope’, which she repeats throughout the show.\(^{30}\)

At the dock, the audience is introduced to Jack Driscoll, the first mate of the ship and the character who is to become Ann’s love interest. When Ann pushes Driscoll aside to stop a falling barrel that is being loaded onto the ship from crushing him, she reveals herself to the crew, who taunt her and try to grab at her dress. Driscoll (dubbed by the creators as “the lover” and described as “by-the-book”\(^{31}\)) is violently opposed to Ann being aboard the ship, claiming that women cause problems. In an attempt to mollify the crew, Denham introduces Ann as the latest Hollywood star then bribes Captain Engelhorn (performed by Richard Piper) to allow her to board, just as he bribes the captain to also allow gas canisters aboard the ship (see Figure 28).

\textbf{Figure 28}: Carl Denham attempting to get has canisters aboard the ship by bribing Captain Engelhorn and Jack Driscoll.

\(^{30}\) From my observations, the meaning of this mantra became clear in later performances: Denham states to Weston in the opening conversation, that his leading lady must have hope in her eyes.

When all but Denham remain on stage, a small monkey named Ignatz, operated by two puppeteers, comes on deck, chattering and bouncing around Denham, who is reflecting upon his upcoming journey. With the Statue of Liberty looming over the ship, Denham jokingly telling Ignatz: “Lady Liberty wants us. She’s welcoming us...all the monkeys!” In an ironic, and perhaps prophetic moment, Denham tells Ignatz: “wave goodbye to Lady Liberty”.

Behind Denham, the colossal Statue of Liberty glides slowly by, depicted on the large LED screen backdrop to the stage, suggesting the ship’s departure past the Statue and out to sea, as Denham performs “Colossus” (see Figure 29). According to Kramer, “Colossus” is about ‘Carl [singing] of his dream to come home someone better than before’. The lyrics for this song are inspired by the poem "New Colossus", written by Emma Lazaras in 1883, which is inscribed on a plaque at the feet of Lady Liberty (see appendix for lyrics of the song and the poem).

As Pavlovic wrote for the program notes: ‘the poem [placed] at the bottom of the Statue of Liberty to acknowledge the millions of immigrants arriving in America later became

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32 An ironic name meaning 'unknown' and thus suggesting Denham is playing with and heading into the 'unknown'. Denham even jokingly states: 'Hi Ignatz – whatever that means?!

33 “Robert Del Naja – Colossus (performed by Adam Lyons @ King Kong Live on Stage Global Launch)”, YouTube video, posted by MASSIVEATTACK.IE, 15 December 2015, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1krhnnKkHWg.
an inspiration and a lyric for the production’s ideas about belonging and acceptance’. The Statue of Liberty was the first sight of America for all immigrants and stood as a welcome to the Land of the Free. As such, it is particularly poignant, and perhaps deliberately ironic, that Denham—whose real name we learn is Denitzsky—performs this song.

In the next scene, Ann lies on her bed aboard the ship. Denham arrives and tells her to get ready for her first filming. As Ann decides what to wear, she begins to sing her breakout, character-revealing song, “Special FX”, a hypersexual number that features Ann wearing white thigh-high stockings with a white corset. The School Resource Pack suggests that Ann receives ‘a makeover worthy of a Hollywood starlet’. Supporting her in this song is a line of dancers in futuristic dominatrix-style costumes, not unlike the fem-bots in Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery, 1997 (see Figure 30).

Throughout the song Ann states: ‘I’ve got a body. And it’s naughty. And I’ve got red lips. And look at these eyes! And these thighs! Look at me!’.

Figure 30: Ann Darrow and Company performing "Special FX".

The King Kong website described the choreography for this song as ‘a mix of Broadway meets Beyoncé and Lady Gaga’. The song features a dub-step/electro-song titled "Pon de Floor" by Major Lazer that was made famous by Beyoncé who heavily sampled this

36 “Blog”, King Kong: Live on Stage, (site discontinued).
work in her song “Run the World (Girls)”. Having finished the song, Ann comes aboard the deck where Denham hands her a white dress to put on, at which point Ann suddenly becomes self-conscious about her state of undress.

In a recreation of both the 1933 and 2005 films, Denham directs Ann in her very first film shoot: "look left... higher... now pretend like you've seen something horrible... eyes wide... now scream", which she attempts to follow, while the crew members watch in amusement (see Figure 31). In later performances, Denham's directions became more and more impassioned, resulting in him asking Ann to rip off her bodice. At this point, Jack steps in to stop him—marking the beginning of Ann and Jack’s romantic relationship. As the rest of the crew head below decks, Ann and Jack begin talking, with both characters attempting to guess each other's histories: Jack correctly guesses that Ann is from the country, while Ann guesses that Jack (or Galahad, as she jokingly calls him) is a dropout and likes to take the easy path. The School Resource Pack explains that ‘blueblood Jack is running from the very thing that Ann is seeking’: fame.

**Figure 31**: Anne Darrow in her screen test aboard the ship with Carl Denham giving her directions on how to act. Published on Facebook on 20 June 2013.

After the preview performances, this conversation between Ann and Jack was extended to include more detail about Jack's past. His father is the owner of the well-known Driscoll Steel, the company that constructed the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, from which ten men fell to their deaths when the net, placed below the bridge to catch

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any falling workmen, failed (”Perfect”). Ann asks Jack if he ever learnt to dance, at which point they begin dancing on stage. The *King Kong: Live on Stage* website describes the scene: 'The Foxtrot: a number between Ann and Jack as they are falling in love based on the style of Irene and Vernon Castle, the early twentieth-century husband and wife ballroom dance stars'.

![Figure 32: Ann Darrow and Jack Driscoll. Published on Facebook 20 June 2013.](image)

When the ship abruptly lands on the shore of Skull Island and the crew race on stage, they encounter a racially unidentifiable native tribe, wearing silvery robes covering their entire bodies upon which changing patterns are projected (see Figure 32). Along with dissonant chanting, spasmodic movements, and eerie lighting, this gives the impression that the performers are in a quivering trance-like state. The matriarch (performed by the same actress also plays Cassandra) has red hands, symbolising the blood of her human sacrifices (see Figure 36). The *King Kong* website describes the choreography: 'The Ritual: two Skull Island communal dances featuring projections and influenced in look by the Nederlands Dans Theatre and Pina Bausch'.

The portrayal of the natives of Skull Island is strikingly unlike any of the preceding films. The depiction of the natives in the 1933 film was (according to our modern sensibilities) racist. Although a great deal of discussion has focused on the evolution of Kong from a representation of African Americans to Christ-like figure, far less discourse has focused on the evolution of natives of Skull Island, who have also changed significantly in each of the following.

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39 “Blog”, *King Kong: Live on Stage*, (site discontinued).

40 “Blog”, *King Kong: Live on Stage*, (site discontinued). Pina Bausch and the Nederlands Dans Theatre are known for their contemporary choreography and ballet.
the aforementioned films. The natives in the original film were performed by African-Americans portraying Pacific Islander-like people with grass skirts, bone necklaces, coconut bras, face paint, etc. In the 1976 film, the native tribe of Skull Island are also performed by black peoples with grass skirts, cloth bras, and necklaces made of teeth and bones. Their sacrificial ceremony includes drums and percussive instruments, chanting, yelling and whooping, smoke, and dancing. Certain male members of the tribe are dressed in ghost-like costumes covering their heads and bodies, while the leader is dressed as a gorilla complete with a mask and brown hair-like headdress. They place a veil of grass upon the female sacrifices head before calling for Kong to collect his ‘wife’, by using animal horns as trumpets. By the time the 2005 film was the released, the natives were performed by darker skinned people (although this was due to make-up) who are a primitive and savage civilisation with scarifications on their skin, wearing minimal clothing or other recognisable markings (making them less racially identifiable), carrying crude weapons used to brutally attack and kill the Americans, and appeared – as film critic Joe William’s described them – ‘zombie-eyed’ or possessed (see Figure 33, Figure 34, Figure 35).41

Figure 33: Natives of Skull Island in the 1933 King Kong film.

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41 Joe Williams, ‘This ‘King Kong’ is Evolution Done Right’, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 14 December 2005.
The creators of the *King Kong* musical could not replicate these characters. Instead they chose to include avant-garde or futuristic techniques to portray a supposedly primitive culture. As the review for *Canberra Times* noted: ‘the Hollywood ooga-booga [of the natives] depicted in the [1933] movie is an obvious no-no, but replacing a supposedly Stone Age tribe with a pack of silvery dancers writhing in video white noise is a curious solution to a problem of taste’.\(^\text{42}\) Ironically, almost all elements of Skull Island—a supposedly primitive location ruled by prehistoric beasts—are portrayed using futuristic techniques in the musical.

\(^\text{42}\) “King Kong Clings on to Audience’s Sky-High Expectations”, *Canberra Times*, 17 June 2013.
Whilst performing their sacrificial ceremony, the natives chant, whoop and sing with a wide vibrato accompanied by electro music ("The Ritual" mixed with "Genesis" by Justice). As the Americans arrive, they witness this sacrificial ceremony (see Figure 37). When the natives see Ann, they attempt to capture her, leading to an altercation between the Americans and the native tribe during which shots are fired, causing the natives to flee, leaving only the crew on stage.

In an awkward transition, the stage tilts and transforms back into the deck of the ship. As the crew discuss leaving Skull Island, Ann is surreptitiously kidnapped by the natives and tied up in the silky vines and is lifted into the ceiling of the stage. When they realise that Ann has been kidnapped, the crew race off stage in search of her. The natives
resume their chanting as part of the sacrificial ceremony as Ann is lowered from the ceiling (see Figure 38).

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 38:** The natives of Skull Island calling for Kong to collect his 'wife' (Ann Darrow), which is suspended in vines in the background. In this image we can also see the natives with red hands, symbolising spilt blood.

Just like the 1933 film, the audience hears the pounding of Kong's paws on the ground and the breaking and falling of trees as he nears the natives, creating a sense of foreboding. The sound of Kong’s approach reaches a deafening climax that is almost overwhelming. As Kramer stated, Kong 'is the largest manifestation of male energy on earth. Imagine putting a 30–40 foot creature on stage and [imagine] that running...[his pounding paws on the ground is] going to create its own soundtrack'. As Kong nears the group, a single light is shone upon Ann, who is suspended in the air. Behind her the audience see Kong’s mouth, nose and eyes only, creating an overwhelming sense of foreboding. Imitating the iconic moment that has been consistently portrayed in all three films, Ann screams at the sight of Kong. Kong sniffs at Ann before grasping her in his enormous paw, releasing her from her bindings. Kong starts running with Ann ("The Ascent" mixed with "Stress" by Justice), then jumps and is lifted in the ceiling of the stage.

The crew run on stage, but Jack stops them, telling them to go back to the ship for guns and other supplies, while he goes after Ann. Meanwhile, sounds of Kong running and

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43 "King Kong – Podcast Ep 1 (Behind the Scenes with Daniel Kramer)", *YouTube* video, posted by Showbixintl, 6 June 2012. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8AVn3uoRaB0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8AVn3uoRaB0).
Ann screaming can be heard in the background. Denham quips, ‘You wouldn’t believe it unless you saw it?’ and mutters to himself that this statement would make a good title for a show. This triggers Denham’s idea to capture Kong and return him to New York City. As the crew runs off, Jack begins to climb up and across the beams, singing “In The Face of Forever” (see Figure 39).

![Figure 39: Jack Driscoll performing "The Face of Forever".](image)

In the next scene, Kong is partially hidden behind an opaque screen covering half the stage (which is meant to imply his abode) while Ann lies motionless nearby. When Ann wakes she screams at the sight of Kong; Kong roars at her in return. What follows is a wordless interaction between the two characters. Ann attempts to flee, only to be held back by Kong. But when Kong rips her dress (causing him to laugh), Ann fights back, screaming at Kong and kicking his arm. Now sulking at being kicked, Kong throws Ann’s dress back to her before hiding behind the screen again (see Figure 40). This communication between Ann and Kong is similar to the 1976 film, in which Dwan continually tries to run away from Kong, but he pounds the ground with his hand to prevent her from doing so. Eventually Dwan hits Kong’s lip and tells him to hurry up and eat her if that is what he intends.
As Ann is trying to get dressed again, an overgrown luminescent green snake, also operated by puppeteers, slithers down the right side of the proscenium arch and onto the stage. Ann calls for Kong, alerting him to her danger (see Figure 41). As in all three films, Kong fights the snake, but suffers a bite in the process (“Poison” mixed with “Genesis” from Jus†ice, which is Kong’s theme song, discussed further in Chapter 6). When Ann screams, Kong grabs the tail of the snake, dragging it behind the screen, before emerging with the snake in his hands, and crushing its head, indicated aurally with high-pitched sounds like metal being crushed.

Figure 40: Ann Darrow screaming at Kong.

Figure 41: The florescent green cobra, also operated by puppeteers, which attacked Ann and Kong.
The screen is lifted and the snake pulled off stage, leaving Kong centre stage where he beats his chest in triumph, another iconic moment featured in all three films. This is the first time the audience sees Kong in his entirety. Kong slumps onto the stage in a state of gloom and exhaustion. Recognising that Kong fought the snake to save her, Ann thanks Kong and tries to dress his snakebite with her torn dress, despite his continued growling at her.

As Ann caresses Kong to sleep, she sings “Full Moon Lullaby”, a ‘haunting, halting lullaby to soothe the beast to sleep’, written by Marius de Vries with lyrics by Michael Mitnick (see Figure 42 and Figure 43). Kramer describes this moment as when ‘the beauty has tamed the beast’s heart’.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 42:** Ann Darrow performing "Full Moon Lullaby".

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45 “King Kong: Performance of Full Moon from the Melbourne musical”, *YouTube* video, posted by TheWorldNewsChannel7, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cbkSDf6D4O0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cbkSDf6D4O0).
Like the 2005 film, Jack appears and whispers to Ann that they should leave. When Kong awakes and sees Ann gone, he runs after her (“The Chase” mixed with “Stress” by Justice, see Figure 44).46

As Kong leaps into the air, he is lifted into the ceiling, just as Ann and Jack race on the stage where they meet the crew from the ship, who are all dressed in silver space outfits,

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46 “The Making of King Kong the Musical: A Conversation with the Creators” as part of the Melbourne Conversation Festival, 27 July 2013.
complete with copper coloured foil body suits and glass bubbleheads. The crew tie up Ann, place a gas mask over her face, and leave her in the centre of the stage, facing the back wall, as bait for Kong. Jack tries to stop them but is similarly restrained.

When Kong arrives the crew members release green gas from the canisters, which Denham explains, will kill any human without a mask, but will only cause Kong to fall asleep. The natives, who were not given masks, slump to the ground, presumably dead. Above them three male members of the tribe (dressed in tall black hats) hang from nooses as if lynched. As Kong falls asleep, the music fades, except for Cassandra's wailing, which can be heard off stage, again warning the audience of impending doom. Denham concludes Act 1 by stating: 'We're going to Broadway, kids'.

During intermission, the word “LIBERTY” is printed backwards on the curtain, reiterating the symbolic importance of the Statue of Liberty and Denham's backwards view of freedom (see Figure 45).

**Figure 45**: The curtain during intermission featuring the word LIBERTY spelt backwards.

**Synopsis: Act 2**

The second Act begins with a Christmas scene in New York City, complete with reindeer hanging from the roof, gingerbread men, candy cane decorations, and performers in Santa and elf costumes (see Figure 46). The festive set design contrasts sharply with the poverty that was witnessed in the first act. On one of many Facebook status updates, the *King Kong: Live on Stage* administrators posted an image with the caption 'New York
1933: Recession, Greed, Christmas Bonuses for the Billionaires... Doesn’t sound too different to today!.

Figure 46: Christmas-themed set for the opening of Act 2.

Ann performs the second verse of “What’s It Gonna Take?” but is interrupted by the distinctive bass opening of “Genesis” by Justice, as part of the song “The Greatest Show on Earth”. A screen, like a billboard, lights up as Denham and two girls in furry ‘gorilla’ leotards emerge. Denham, who now has a dominating, pimp-like attitude, tries to entice people to come to the theatre and see his show: “The Eighth Wonder of the World”. The King Kong website describes the choreography of the number: ‘a big second act opening [number] with the full company in Thriller-esque Zombie mode, as Carl Denham lures passers-by off the streets into his Kong extravaganza’. The female company join Denham on stage with a repetitive and inane verse while the words KING and KONG are displayed on the LED screen:

King Kong, King Kong,
He's very very big and he's very very strong.

King Kong, King Kong,

47 Facebook,

48 “Blog”, King Kong: Live on Stage, (site discontinued).
He's King of the jungle and he's forty-foot long.

This song is interrupted by Cassandra: she stammers and sings mostly unintelligible comments, but words such as “We’re falling” and “blood” can be understood (“Prophecy 2”). Dismissing Cassandra, Denham reprises “Greatest Show on Earth”, drawing a large crowd into the theatre to see this new wonder. Cassandra is left alone on stage to sing ‘Let Earth receive its King’ from the Christmas hymn “Joy to the World”.

Ann and Jack race on stage but stop short at the entrance to the theatre. Unlike the 1933 or 1976 films, it is evident that neither Ann nor Jack were invited to the show, presumably because of their opposition to Kong’s exploitation.49 Before entering the theatre alone, leaving Ann to reflect on the situation, Driscoll asks Ann to dance with him (“Dance With Me”), but Ann stops the dance short and Jack proposes to her (“A Simple Prayer”).

The curtain closes, leaving Denham on the apron of the stage in his changing room talking to himself about the financial success he has made from Kong: ‘It’s my turn to rise’. A stagehand informs Denham of Jack’s attendance and adds that Kong has not woken up yet as they may have used too much sleeping gas. Denham is, however, determined to go on with the show. The two characters continue to talk, during which the stagehand scoffs at Kong’s predicament, ‘oh, how the mighty have fallen’. Denham moves centre stage, facing the curtain, then spins suddenly and addresses the audience as if they are the public who are attending his show; “Ladies and Gentleman”, he announces, “on October 3rd this year we set out on an adventure, which was as insurmountable as our Empire State Building. Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you the Eighth Wonder of the World.”50

This speech is unlike the address that Denham gave to the audience in the 1933 film (see Chapter 3). In the original speech, Denham describes their adventure in greater detail, whilst also commenting on Kong’s journey from god to captive. Jackson evidently recognised the significant of this speech, as it was repeated, almost verbatim, in the

49 In the 2005 film, Ann and Jack are also opposed to Denham’s show and his exploitation of Kong. Ann and Jack’s relationship, however, is most closely related to the 1933 film in which the characters are recently married.

50 Statement is only approximate – obtained by viewing show.
2005 film. The curtains are drawn apart to reveal Kong sitting centre stage in a state of semi-consciousness. The music changes instantly to "Genesis" by Justice. The company re-enters in purple Egyptian-inspired costumes and, along with Denham, perform "Thrill 4 the Kill"\textsuperscript{51}: a 'showbizzy monster madness' number featuring 'exotic' or primitive movements, suggesting the natives of Skull Island. During the song, Denham mocks Kong: we’re 'in the presence of a God – sing almighty King!'.

Ann runs through the audience and onto the stage, facing Kong. Unwilling to make a fuss, Denham pretends Ann’s presence is part of the show, announcing 'Ann Darrow, ladies and gentlemen', to which Ann responds: 'how many people died for your entertainment?'. "Genesis" continues to play subtly in the background along with the sound of native’s screaming, an aural answer to Ann’s question. When the guards attempt to escort Ann off the stage, she screams, awaking Kong from his semi-consciousness: he then breaks free from his chains in his attempt to save Ann.

The curtain falls, with just the sounds of Kong grunting and roaring and humans screaming to indicate the havoc Kong wreaks as he breaks free of the theatre and roams New York City. Six blonde-wigged dancers who are midway through getting dressed in white dresses and high heels are pushed on stage in front of the curtain and told to entertain the 'audience' as a distraction to the destruction Kong is causing (performed to the traditional version of "Get Happy"), occasionally interrupted by Kong’s roars. After a verse of the song, the curtains open again to reveal photographers taking pictures of Kong climbing the steel beams of the set (see Figure 47).

\textsuperscript{51} “Blog”, King Kong: Live on Stage, (site discontinued).
The song "Get Happy" changes from its traditional version to a remix by the Australian band The Avalanches. Desperately trying to find Ann, Kong grabs several blonde women, who he tosses aside, as he continues to climb buildings. Like a Greek Chorus of uninvolved witnesses and commentators on the action, the troupe of six blonde-wigged dancers continue their song, whilst weaving through the havoc that Kong is causing. An uncredited and unlisted "Hallelujah" chorus is performed as the dead bodies of the blonde women, lying on the stage after having been thrown off the building by Kong, rise in slow motion into the ceiling (this is the second of four slow motion scenes). This sequence is performed with red lighting symbolising the blood that Kong has spilled on the streets of New York City. Kong roars, silencing all music and sound. Now in silence, Kong walks to the apron of the stage, allowing the audience yet another chance to marvel at his technology. Kong sniffs and whimpers, as if testing the audience. Ann runs on stage, explaining to Jack, 'it's me or all the people in this city'. Just as shots are fired, Kong grabs Ann in his paw and leaps into the ceiling of the stage as the curtains are drawn (see Figure 48).
A projection of rows upon rows of windows slowly glide downwards on the curtain, while some of the company face the audience but look to the ceiling, as if watching Kong climb to the top of Empire State Building. Similar to the 2005 film, Jack attempts to get past the soldiers and into the building to rescue Ann, but is restrained. Denham insists they allow Jack through, hoping that Jack will be able to stop the madness and protect his investment. But the soldiers arrest Denham instead, blaming him for the destruction Kong has caused. Denham defensively claims: ‘it’s beauty that killed the beast’.

The character of Denham in the musical is radically different from the original movie. In the 1933 film, Driscoll and the journalists dub Denham the “hero” who saved all the men on the island, whereas in the 1976 and 2005 films (as well as the musical) Denham is an exploiter and has no regard for Kong. Likewise, the characters of Ann and Jack have changed significantly from the original film. In the 1933 film, Ann and Jack are a newly married couple who are willing participants in Denham’s show. In the 1976 film, Jack is against the exploitation of Kong, whereas Dwan is complicit in Denham’s show in her attempt to find fame. The 2005 film featured a far more empathetic Ann and Jack, who are against any exploitation of Kong and have refused any participation in Denham’s extravaganza. In this film Ann seeks Kong after he breaks free of the theatre, knowing that she is the only person who could possibly help him, whereas in the earlier films, Ann (or Dwan) runs away and hides from Kong.
The remainder of the company (dressed in black like mourners) enters the stage with Cassandra at the front ("Rise", see appendix for lyrics). Kramer explained this song occurs ‘as Cassandra watches the folly of King Kong tearing his way across New York City as man attempts to control beast’.\(^{52}\) While singing, Cassandra looks accusingly at other members of the company and the audience, as if blaming them for their complicit involvement.

The curtains open again to reveal Ann and Kong sitting centre stage atop the Empire State Building (minus the final spire at the tip of the building, like the 1933 and 2005 films). Ann reprises her song for Kong, "Full Moon Lullaby" (see Figure 49).

\[\text{Figure 49: Ann Darrow and Kong sitting atop the Empire State Building.}\]

The audience hears the approaching aeroplanes, which are represented by streaking lights on the LED screen. The sound of the planes is accompanied by the beginning of Henryk Górecki's *a capella* choral work, "Amen Opus 35".

As in the films, Kong stands erect on the top of the Empire State building, attempting to grab the circling aeroplanes that are shooting at him and Ann. On the third round of fire

\(^{52}\) “Queenie van de Zandt sings Rise as the KING KONG Global Launch”, *YouTube* video, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAG2_33sm5I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAG2_33sm5I), (site discontinued).
from the planes, Kong is hit and nearly falls off the building, but manages to hold on. Throughout this scene we witness the third of four slow motion moments, which closely resembles a scene from the 2005 film. Kong stands erect and beats his chest in one final show of strength, while Ann stares directly towards the audience, screaming silently as she waves her arms back and forth in slow motion, indicating for the planes to stop shooting. Both Ann and Kong stop their slow-motion movements and remain frozen with arms outstretched (see Figure 50).

![Figure 50: Kong and Ann atop the Empire State Building as the fatal round of fire from the circling planes is delivered.](image)

The planes are heard again, but with singular clarity. As the fatal round of fire from the planes is delivered a brilliant white light momentarily floods the stage, just as Górecki’s “Amen Opus 35” reaches its climax. The Empire State Building, with Ann still atop, sinks slowly into the stage, as Kong is lifted in slow motion (the fourth and final slow motion scene), and suspended in mid-air on his back, like a body being raised from the dead. Górecki’s work has a moment of silence, before the opening section is repeated, like one final breath. After a brief moment with a black stage, a single light shines upon Kong. Members of the company, dressed in black and carrying umbrellas, stand around Kong looking at the ‘beast’, like mourners at a funeral. Ann pets Kong’s face like she did on Skull Island. A sheer transparent curtain falls, concluding the show. “Kill 4 the Thrill” is reprised for the curtain call.
CHAPTER 6

Analysis of King Kong: A Music Theatre Event

The book for the King Kong musical was closely related to the original screenplay, with many scenes and lines lifted directed from the 1933 film. However, it is evident that the creators of the King Kong musical intended the show to be more than just an homage to the original movie. They claimed loftier ambitions for their narrative, equating it to other iconic works that have received significant attention due to their socio-political and personal resonances and interpretations, and drawing parallels between the story of Kong and contemporary social and political issues.

In this Chapter, I examine the book and music of the King Kong musical, including the subtexts of the show and how, like its film predecessors, it can be seen as a microcosm of contemporary society. In the following section I narrow my scope to examine the musical styles and songs in the show, as well as the various artists who contributed works to the musical.

In a lengthy introduction to the programme, Pavlovic outlined some of the correlations between the 1933 narrative and modern society:

We found ourselves in an eerie parallel existence. By day we researched New York in 1933 – the Great Depression; the frenzy of construction; poverty contrasting so vividly with excess – while by night the news bulletins dominated our screens with talk of a financial crisis on a scale not seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s... Climate change and the pending destruction of various environments around the world were also hot topics... I felt there was a lot that made King Kong relevant to an audience in 2013 and so I was certain that the story did warrant a retelling.’

Yet, as Pavlovic stated in one of the YouTube podcasts:

In the beginning it was an idea about bringing the love story to the stage and I thought ‘why hasn’t anyone done this before?’ There’s got to be something to say.

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in putting the film onto the stage or reviving something that already exists. I think the challenge is for us to have something new to say.\textsuperscript{54}

The ‘something new to say’ centred on the concept of the ‘other’, that is, those ostracised from society, or those who are considered to be different. In the \textit{School Resource Pack}, (a document that was ‘designed to offer insights into our musical \textit{King Kong}, both in relation to its themes, as well as the unique production values that make this show so extraordinary’\textsuperscript{55}) Kramer and Lucas stated they had one guiding idea: ‘The Shadow. The Other. The manner in which we project our darkest fears and emotions onto others’.\textsuperscript{56} In the same source, Kramer expands on this concept, explaining his interpretation of the narrative:

I feel we are exploring how desire can lead to destruction, how ambition can become blinding greed, how wealth and success can explode in our hands, how shadows and fear can actually bring revelation and beauty, how the inevitable law of physics holds true: for every action there is an opposite and equal reaction. If we destroy another society, if we capture and mock their gods and goddesses, if we capitalise and profiteer from their destruction and insult, there will be consequences.\textsuperscript{57}

Although Kramer and Lucas had similar interpretations, Lucas stated that the story of \textit{King Kong} did not require reimagining: ‘if you take the original movie and show it to an audience in 2012, you don’t actually have to change much for their perspective to have shifted from 1933. It seemed that we didn’t have to do a lot of spin, what we had to do was just had to tell the story faithfully’.\textsuperscript{58} Yet, Lucas also stated that when an audience is already familiar with the ending of a narrative, as they would be with \textit{King Kong}, they

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{54} “King Kong. Behind the Scenes Podcast Episode 2: Meet Producer Carmen Pavlovic”, \textit{YouTube} video, \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBY1BPIlW6I}, posted by GlobalCreatures, 27 June 2012.
\textsuperscript{56} “Themes of King Kong”, \textit{School Resource Pack}, 8.
\textsuperscript{57} “Themes of KING KONG”, \textit{School Resource Pack}, 8.
\textsuperscript{58} “King Kong – Episode 3 (Craig Lucas)”, \textit{YouTube} video, \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BeF8F9X3y1g}, posted by Showbizintl, 25 July 2012.
\end{flushleft}
seek something else from the show, such as gaining a greater understanding of the characters and their motivations.\footnote{The Story of Kong, School Resource Pack, 7.}

For Pavlovic, the narrative of \textit{King Kong} drew parallels with our treatment of refugees, or ‘boat people’:

For [Merian C. Cooper]... \textit{Kong} was simply a story about a beauty and a beast. Ultimately it is. But the story is about a lot of other things too – it’s about a fear of the ‘other’ and it’s about a fall from grace. There is a lot of ‘falling’ in the story of \textit{King Kong}... America had fallen from grace in the eyes of the world... In 2002 I had left Australia appalled at the way politicians had manufactured a threat of ‘boat people’ for political expediency. Returning in 2008 I was sad to see that not much had changed. “Queue Jumpers” was still a common expression used ignorantly by many people who should know better. Australia remained in the grips of hysteria about the ‘boat people’ – how easily our country had fallen prey to a fear of the ‘other’ – a fear of that which is unknown.\footnote{Carmen Pavlovic, Programme Notes for \textit{King Kong: A Music Theatre Event}, published 2013.}

Kramer, on the other hand, suggested that the ‘other’ could also refer to personal issues:

The beauty and beast myth is personal to us all — from time to time, we all feel like the ugly, misunderstood, demonised beast; we all dream of being understood, accepted for who we are, loved. Midway through the myth, we are reminded that the beast is actually a beautiful, gentle, loving being whom society has made a monster with their own projections.\footnote{“The Story of Kong”, School Resource Pack, 7.}

As Pavlovic suggested, the musical included a number of direct and symbolic references to falling, religious metaphors, and symbols of freedom to demonstrate our (i.e. society’s) fall from grace. There are three explicit references to falling in the staged show. The first is Act I when Jack sings about his father’s workmen falling from the Golden Gate Bridge:

I picture them
Jack’s story about his greedy steel manufacturing father (who can be seen to represent the building boom of the 1920s and ‘30s) and the workmen falling from the bridge provides a specific example of mankind’s fall from grace. There are connotations of the destruction of the environment and the exploitation of innocent people (the workmen) for the sake of greed and money (Jack’s father). Jack’s story is based upon an historical event in which ten men fell to their deaths when a safety net placed under the bridge failed. The song focuses on the human cost of the building, not the structural feat of constructing the bridge.

The second reference to falling is the song “In the Face of Forever”, also performed by Driscoll, as he climbs the vines in his attempt to rescue Ann from Kong on Skull Island.

My heart is pounding
In the face of the unknown
But I will not surrender
To the fear I have.

I’m falling

The chorus consists entirely of the lyrics “I’m falling”. There are many possible interpretations of these lyrics: when considered in relation to the previous song, also sung by Driscoll, they suggest parallels between the danger that Jack now finds himself in and his father’s workmen who fell to their deaths. The lyrics could also be interpreted as Jack realising that he is ‘falling’ for Ann, so much so that he is willing to climb a cliff-face despite his fear of heights – presumably a result of the deaths from his father bridge. But, as Jack also sings, ‘I know I must go on’.

The third of the explicit references to falling is in the song “Rise” performed by Cassandra as she and the company watch Kong climb the Empire State Building.

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62 Lyrics are incomplete – lyrics are have been obtained from observation.
Although the title refers to rising, the song also addresses the subsequent (and perhaps inevitable) fall.

Rise (x 6)
We watch it rise. Rise.
Then the empire falls.

There are also less explicit references to falling, and also rising. When Kong throws the blonde women to their deaths in his search for Ann, they are also shown rising again, in slow motion, into the ceiling of the stage, as if being lifted to heaven. The references to rising could be interpreted as implying hope: hope that Jack will save Ann and love will prevail, hope that mankind will rise to the challenge of protecting the most vulnerable in society, and hope that when we fall, we will then rise to heaven or receive some salvation.

Perhaps the most moving reference to falling comes when Kong falls from the Empire State Building to his death on the streets of New York City; the god of Skull Island falls from the top of the world (or at least the highest point in New York), to the level of his captors and exploiters. This particular fall is the climax of the story but unlike in the previous examples, Kong does not rise again. There is no suggestion that he ever does, reiterating the finality of his death and the complete destruction of the animal kingdom, or ‘other’.

The School Resource Pack suggested that the concept of rising and falling is at the heart of the King Kong narrative:

On a conceptual level [Peter] England and director Daniel Kramer talked at length about the story in terms of it being a timeless, cyclical ritual: the rise and fall of a species in evolution, the rise and fall of empires in civilisations. Says England, ‘On a more detailed level we uncovered similar cycles within the story structure and arrived at one very simple visual expression of this – the Moon. At times it is just the Full Moon that sets the stage. There is something gloriously powerful and potent about this simplicity’. 65

This statement explains the proliferation of images of the moon in both the *King Kong* musical itself and in the associated advertising (see Figure 51).

![Image of Kong and moon](image1)

**Figure 51:** Image featured in advertisements for *King Kong: A Music Theatre Event* featuring the moon, Kong, and Ann Darrow.

In *King Kong*, the moon is primarily featured in Act 1 when the characters are on Skull Island, and is most prominent in the song "Full Moon Lullaby". It is also featured in a reprise of this song towards the end of the musical, as Kong and Ann sit atop the Empire State Building (see Figure 52).

![Image of Kong and Ann Darrow](image2)

**Figure 52:** Kong and Ann Darrow atop the Empire State Building during the reprise of "Full Moon Lullaby".

The concept of falling is developed further in a series of references to the biblical story of Eve being tricked by a snake into eating an apple from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge. The apple symbolises the fall: a fall from grace, a gaining of knowledge, sin,
and mortality, whereas the snake is a symbol of duality, in particular between good and evil, an old life and birth of a new one, vengefulness, and sin.\textsuperscript{66}

The first reference to the Genesis story in the musical occurs in one of the early scenes in Act 1, when Ann attempts to steal an apple from a fruit merchant. Although the staged show is simply repeating a key scene from the original film, the scene is performed in slow motion to emphasise the action. The bowl of red apples near Ann's bed on board the ship serves as a subtle reference back to this scene. These apples can be seen to serve as a symbol of temptation, drawing Ann away from her innocent life and tempting her with enlightenment and sin. It is also notable that Kong's theme song is titled “Genesis” by Just\textsuperscript{ice}.

In the next scene, Ann sings "Special FX", an overtly sexual musical number performed with female members of the ensemble dancing in very scanty costumes. At the end of this song, Denham gives Ann a long white (almost bridal) dress to cover herself, at which point she becomes aware of, and embarrassed by, her nakedness, just as Adam and Eve were made aware of their nakedness after consuming the forbidden fruit. As some critics noted, the portrayal of Ann and the other female ensemble members in revealing costumes undermines the message of the show:

The use of tits and arse, in particular, can feel utterly gratuitous. In a story that condemns the crass exploitation of an animal for entertainment, the portrayal of women [in King Kong] is troubling.\textsuperscript{67}

This song is not the only scene that pushes the sexualisation of women, but this is certainly the most overt.

The symbolism of the fall is taken up again when Kong fights with a serpent, rather than a lizard, as in the original film. The serpent can be seen to represent both temptations and threat. Kong's triumph over the snake implies the ending of a (metaphoric) life and the beginning of a new one. Killing the snake is a turning point in Kong's life: shortly after this scene Kong is taken to New York City. Furthermore, Kong's battle with the

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\textsuperscript{67} Cameron Woodhead, "King Kong", \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 15 June 2013.
snake triggers a turning point for Ann, who no longer sees Kong as purely beastly, but as capable of emotions. Lucas described Kong as ‘such a great mythological creature because he’s a King and God. He’s also very human being. We’re talking about a sentient being that grieves and longs and emphasises and understands a great deal’, and this is first revealed to us in his battle with the serpent.

The religious overtones of the show are most overt in the final scene, in which Ann and Kong stand erect arms outstretched, in a pose resembling a crucifixion, while Gorecki’s ”Amen Opus 35” is played in its entirety. As Dr Stephenson Shaffer suggested in her TEDx talk in 2013 in regards to the 1933 film, this final scene is the moment when the audience sees Kong as a Christ-like figure: he stands erect at the top of the Empire State Building, where he, a victim and a King, is persecuted by the circling planes, resulting in his death because of our sins. Although there are parallels between the 1933 film and this scene, it is more closely related to the 2005 movie, which also features slow-motion sequences, and simple vocal accompaniment. Unlike the films, however, the musical expands on the idea, drawing more explicit parallels with Christianity.

There are also several religious references in the music. Górecki’s ”Amen Opus 35”, an a capella work written in 1975, repeats just one word, ‘Amen’. Górecki’s work begins gently and slowly, almost meditatively, then builds to full energy then lulls before taking a momentary pause, then repeating the opening piano section before fading slowly to nothing: a musical depiction of Kong’s dying moments. Giuseppe Verdi’s ”Dies Irae” from his Messa da Requiem, on the other hand, is mixed with the song “Get Happy”, both of which refer to the day of reckoning. As the King Kong team wrote:

“Dies Irae” is possibly one of the most powerful and evocative pieces of music to have emerged from the 19th century and portrays Christ’s wrath when

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69 Although the inclusion of church music in a staged show centred upon an overgrown ape could be considered inappropriate, Kong should not be viewed as simply a wild animal, but rather a representation of the ‘unknown’ and the ‘other’. As such it is not who Kong is, but what he represents that justifies the appropriation of this music and the various religious images.

70 Tracy Stephenson Shaffer, “The Evolution of King Kong: Dr. Tracy Stephenson Shaffer at TEDxLSU”, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwKsWoCmhB8, posted by TEDx Talks, 2 May 2013.
he returns to judge the living and the dead. By adding this music into the mix is to suggest that Kong [sic], like God, is on a rampage, that this is the moment when every living being is judged. ‘Get Happy’ then returns but The Avalanches now invert this with primeval rhythms, distorted chords and a strident rhythmic motif that evokes Kong’s ultimate journey towards destruction.71

The lyrics of “Dies Irae” and “Get Happy” reveal the contradictions of the scene. While the “Dies Irae” portrays the wrath or the Day of Judgment, “Get Happy” is an upbeat song that takes a more optimistic view the Judgement Day (see lyrics below).72 In the show, these two songs function as a warning that society will soon be held accountable for their actions, in particular their treatment of ‘others’.

**Dies Irae**  
The day of wrath
That day
Will dissolves the world in ashes
As foretold by David and Sibyl
How much tremor there will be
When the judge will come
Investigating everything strictly

**Get Happy**  
Come on, get happy!
Get ready for the judgement day!
...  
The sun is shining,
Come on, get happy!
The lord is waiting to take your hand!
Shout hallelujah,
Come on, get happy!

The various Christian metaphors are, however, complicated by the inclusion of more pagan religious figures. The musical has two Greek Mythological components: chorus-like performances by the company; and the character of Cassandra, a fortune-teller or oracle, who has two musical numbers titled “Prophecies”. Her character is a completely new addition: Daniel Kramer saw Queenie van der Zandt (who plays the roles of Cassandra and high priestess of the natives) perform in the Speigeltent in Sydney, and decided to write a character for her in the show.73

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72 “Get Happy” was composed by Harold Arlen with lyrics by Ted Koehler for the 1930 *Nineteen Fifteen Revue*. Judy Garland who performed in the 1950 film *Summer Stock* made the song famous. Numerous performers including Ella Fitzgerald, Tony Bennett, and the casts from *Glee* and *House* have since covered the song.

73 “King Kong Musical Live on Stage in Melbourne”, *Stage Whispers*, 2013.
The music in *King Kong* generally follows in the vein of its megamusical predecessors: a pop-orientated score with music and lyrics written by popular artists (a feature that has become increasingly popular in modern megamusicals). *King Kong*, however, also incorporates numerous popular songs from both the 1920s and ’30s (the era when the original film was produced) and more modern popular songs from the past few decades. The score, arranged by Marius de Vries, incorporates a wide variety of musical styles, including religious works, rock-opera, electronica, and modernised popular songs from the 1920s and ’30s. According to the *School Resource Pack*: ‘The sounds range from electronic tribal rhythms, to a Broadway kick line, from romantic ballads to a traditional belt-it-out “11 o’clock” number. The musical collision of these contrasting acoustic worlds combines to create a revolutionised, contemporary sound world’.74 To achieve this contemporary sound world, Pavlovic and Kramer envisioned a score written by multiple artists, each of whom has their own unique styles. Marius de Vries, who is credited with arranging the show, composed fourteen of the thirty-one numbers and arranged a further eight songs using pre-existing works to which he added his own compositions. De Vries also collaborated on one song with Robert Del Naja (known as 3D) and Guy Garvey. A number of popular artists also contributed works to the show, including Canadian singer-songwriter Sarah McLachlan, who wrote the song “What’s It Gonna Take?” and 3D from the English band Massive Attack, who wrote the music for “Colossus” and collaborated on the lyrics for “In the Face of Forever” with Guy Garvey from the English band Elbow. Garvey also wrote the lyrics for the song “Perfect”. The original director, Daniel Kramer, also collaborated on a number of songs, as did lyricist Michael Mitnick, and writer Craig Lucas. The remaining songs in the show were written by various collaborations between Marius de Vries, Michael Mitnick, Daniel Kramer, and Craig Lucas. De Vries also collaborated with Richard Thomas (who composed the score for *Jerry Springer: The Opera*) for the song “Hunting Season”. Before the premiere of the show, Pavlovic enthused:

I am so excited to have such distinctive and original artists joining us on this musical adventure—they represent our original vision for a score that would travel through genre and time in a way that is contemporary and, I hope, redefining.75

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75 “KING KONG Musical Live on Stage in Melbourne”, *Stage Whispers*. 
Kramer expressed similar ideas, stating on opening night: 'It just has a really fresh contemporary feel, whilst also some big ballads that (I think) melt the heart. So we’re trying to give audiences a taste of the old with a taste of the new'. Daniel Edmonds, the musical director, agreed: 'The music and soundscapes for King Kong are just as epic as everything else about the piece, fusing together beautiful haunting melodies as well as thrilling action sequences'.

There are four pre-existing songs used in the musical (from a total of 30 songs), and a further ten songs that include pre-existing works mixed with original compositions (see Table 2).

The Songs

Table 2: Songs of King Kong.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ACT 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rise Prologue - Performed by Carl Denham. Composed by Marius de Vries. \ Lyric by Daniel Kramer, Michael Mitnick, and Marius de Vries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Hunting Season - Performed by Carl Denham and company. Composed by Marius de Vries. Lyrics by Richard Thomas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Sweethearts on Parade - (Pre-recorded). Performed by The Avalanches. This work is interpolated by two works: \ \ a. Auf Wiedersehen, Darrio - (Pre-recorded) Performed by Dr Buzzard's Original Savannah Band. Composed by Browder Jnr/Darnell. \ \ b. Sweethearts on Parade - Performed by the company. Composed by Charles Newman/Carmen Lombardo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Prophecy 1 - Performed by Cassandra. Composed by Marius de Vries. Lyrics by Craig Lucas.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

76 “King Kong Live on Stage”, YouTube video, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=STkMCwJ0Swg, posted by linuxelf 1, 15 June 2013.

7. **I Wanna Be Loved By You** - Performed by the company. Composed by Herbert Stothart, Bert Kalmar, and Harry Ruby, (1928)


9. **Special FX** - Performed by Ann Darrow and female company. Composed by Marius de Vries. Lyrics by Michael Mitnick and Marius de Vries. This song is interpolated by the following work:
   
   a. **Pon de Floor** - Performed by Major Lazer. Composed by Palmer/ Wall/ Taylor/Pentz.

10. **Perfect** - Composed by Guy Garvey and Marius de Vries. Lyrics by Guy Garvey.

11. **Foxtrot** - (Instrumental) Composed by Marius de Vries.

12. **Ritual** - (Instrumental) Composed by Marius de Vries. This song is interpolated by the following work:
   
   a. **Genesis** - (Instrumental) Composed by Justice

13. **The Ascent** - (Instrumental) Composed by Marius de Vries. This song is interpolated by the following work:
   
   a. **Stress** - (Instrumental) Composed by Justice


15. **Poison** - (Instrumental) Composed by Marius de Vries. This song is interpolated by the following work:
   
   a. **Genesis** - (Instrumental) Composed by Justice


17. **The Chase** - (Instrumental) Composed by Marius de Vries. This song is interpolated by the following work:
   
   a. **Stress** - (Instrumental) Composed by Justice

18. **Capture** - (Instrumental) Composed by Marius de Vries. This song is interpolated by the following work:
   
   a. **Genesis** - (Instrumental) Composed by Justice
ACT 2

1. Enttract - (Instrumental) Composed by Marius de Vries

2. What’s It Gonna Take? - Performed by Ann Darrow. Music and lyrics by Sarah McLachlan

3. The Greatest Show on Earth - Performed by Carl Denham and company. Composed by Marius de Vries. Lyrics by Daniel Kramer, Craig Lucas, and Marius de Vries. This song is interpolated by the following work:
   a. Genesis - (Instrumental) Composed by Justice


6. A Simple Prayer - Performed by Ann Darrow. Composed by Marius de Vries. Lyrics by Daniel Kramer, Michael Mitnick, and Marius de Vries


8. Kill 4 the Thrill - Performed by Carl Denham and Company. Composed by Marius de Vries. Lyrics by Daniel Kramer and Marius de Vries. This song is interpolated by the following work:
   a. Genesis - (Instrumental) Composed by Justice

9. Get Happy - Performed by Company. By The Avalanches This song is interpolated by two works:
   a. Get Happy - (Pre-Recorded) Composed by Ted Koehler/Harold Arlen
   b. Massa Da Requiem Dies Irae - (Pre-Recorded) Composed by Giuseppe Verdi


12. Amen Opus 35 - (Pre-Recorded) Composed by Henryk Górecki

The four popular songs from the 1920s and '30s include "Sweethearts on Parade" and "I Wanna Be Loved by You", both written in 1928, “Get Happy” from 1930, and the anthem
of the Depression Era “Brother Can You Spare a Dime” from 1932. In order to create a ‘contemporary sound world’ (as suggested in the School Resource Pack) almost all of these songs were revamped with electro characteristics, such as synthesised bass, drums and other electronic effects. “Sweethearts on Parade” was mixed with another popular song “Auf Wiedersehen, Darrio” by the band Dr Buzzards Original Savannah Band, from their 1990 album by the same name. “Get Happy” was pre-recorded and modernised (with the use of electro music) by the Australian band The Avalanches specifically for the King Kong musical, and was then mixed with Giuseppe Verdi’s “Dies Irae” from his Messa da Requiem. The songs “Brother Can You Spare A Dime?” and “I Wanna Be Loved By You” were mostly unaltered, but both works were performed by the ensemble rather than soloists.

There are also three more recent popular songs, including two works ("Genesis", which is Kong’s theme song, and “Stress”) by the French band Jus↑ice, who describe their music as “opera-disco”, and a piece by the collaborative project known as Major Lazer ("Pon de Floor"). The two songs by Jus↑ice are used extensively throughout the musical, often mixed with original compositions by Marius de Vries. Major Lazer’s song, “Pon de Floor”, from their album Guns Don’t Kill People...Lazers Do, is also mixed with an original composition by De Vries to create the musical number “Special FX”.

The use of music in a popular style in musical theatre is neither new nor uncommon, in King Kong, however, pop music accounts for the majority of songs in the show. Moreover, many of these popular songs are pre-existing works, i.e. they have not been written for the musical, but have been repurposed. Only about 40% of the songs in the musical have original music and lyrics written for the show. Unlike a juke-box musical, however, King Kong’s pre-recorded works are not tied together by a common style or artist. As multiple artists (each with their own individual styles) wrote these songs, we might consider that King Kong is a “composer-less” musical. The musical structure of the show was overseen by an arranger (in this case, De Vries), but a number of artists composed the musical numbers, similar to a compilation score for a film. Ann Darrow, for example, sings six songs (two of which are reprises) that were composed by two different artists, with lyrics by four different artists. Two of these songs are ballads, another a lullaby, and the third a pop song that features belting as well as jazz elements.

79 Major Lazer is a collaboration between DJs Diplo and Switch. Ryan Dombal, "Major Lazer (Diplo + Switch) to Release "Digital Reggae" LP", Pitchfork, 13 March 2003.
Similarly, the character Carl Denham performs three songs (each stylistically different) by two different composers and five different lyricists. Due to this melange of styles, the characters have no clear musical identity, and the show lacks a clear sense of musical continuity or cohesion.

There were also eight instrumental works (including the “Entract” [sic]). Instrumental numbers (or incidental music) are generally used in musicals to fill time while the cast and crew prepare for the next scene. This music is often a reprise of a work heard earlier in the show, or includes musical material from other songs. In *King Kong*, however, the instrumental music is a main feature of the score and is used at times of heightened emotions. For example, “Stress” by Just rice, is heard twice in the musical: first, when Kong kidnaps Ann Darrow, and second, when Kong chases Ann and Jack, both moments that require a heightened emotional response. The absence of lyrics in instrumental numbers generally causes the narrative to stagnate, however, it does provide an opportunity for visual and technical elements to assume a greater prominence. For example, in “The Chase” (in which we hear “Stress”), the puppet of Kong turns from one side to face the audience where he is momentarily suspended in air, before turning to the other side and continuing to run. The LED screen behind Kong projects moving lights like thousands of tiny stars moving in sequence with Kong (another use of technology specific to *King Kong*). In this more visceral experience, the audience is expected to admire the technology and puppetry of Kong. The music accompanying this predominantly visual scene provides the emotional setting just as background music does in a film.

Although *King Kong: A Music Theatre Event* bears some resemblance to the preceding films, it has been updated, with a subtext—although rather inconspicuous, despite being portrayed in numerous ways—commenting on Western societies’ treatment of ‘others’ and a popular score. Composed by numerous artists, the music in *King Kong* was unusually diverse; the mix of ballads, electro-dub-step, and revamped 1930s pop songs created an eclectic score. According to the critics, the music and book were the weakest elements of the show. Yet, as we shall see in the following Chapter, despite these criticisms, many reviewers also believed the show marked the beginning of something new in musical theatre.

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80 “The Making of King Kong the Musical: A Conversation with the Creators” as part of the Melbourne Conversation Festival, 27 July 2013.
CHAPTER 7

A New Type of Musical?

When *King Kong: A Music Theatre Event* premiered in Melbourne in 2013, much of the commentary surrounding the show focussed on its various atypical elements, leading a number of critics to suggest that a new form of musical theatre was emerging. The sets were more spectacular than most shows seen in Melbourne; the advertisements were hyped and omnipresent; the score was widely varied, from 1930s hits to modern songs associated with pop-queen Beyoncé; the narrative was similar to the original film but framed in a modern and potentially controversial context; and an old black and white film had been reimagined using specially-designed modern technology, often used in a futuristic style. Although the show was unique and generated buzz and excitement amongst critics and audiences alike, these heterogeneous elements made the show difficult to classify. Is it a new form of musical? The reviews of *King Kong* almost unanimously agreed that the show was a ‘game changer': a new form of musical theatre that was pushing the boundaries of conventional Broadway entertainment. Peter Burch of *The Australian*, for example, claimed: ‘on the evidence of Saturday night’s premiere in Melbourne, *King Kong* has redefined the musical form'.¹ These same critics, however, were also deprecatory of the show, in particular the book and music, with many critics suggesting that *King Kong: A Music Theatre Event* was just the latest flashy, sensory-overloaded, high-cost show that was only breaking new ground in the hopes of becoming the next big 'hit' on Broadway. Although *King Kong* might be seen as an isolated anomaly—a one-off show that attempted to push the megamusical genre away from its big, romantic moorings, into a more pop-oriented and fragmented style—a number of other modern musicals have exhibited similar traits, suggesting a new form of musical theatre is emerging, one that combines the conventions of the megamusical with features drawn largely from cinema.

The primary difference between a megamusical and megamovical is the relationship between the staged show and a pre-existing film. As discussed in Chapter 2, more and more films are being converted into musicals. Megamovicals, however, are more than just a film converted into a staged show; the style includes most of the traits of a megamusical (as outlined by Sternfeld) and combines them with cinematic elements,

¹ Peter Burch, "King Kong Will Change the Way We Look at Musicals," *Australian*, 16 June 2013.
evoking a film on stage. These cinematic elements are most overt in the sets, but also extend to the book and score. As Sternfeld suggests in her book, few (if any) shows exhibit all the elements of a megamusical, but a number of consistent features are discernible. The same could be said for megamovicals. As the megamovical is closely related to the megamusical genre, it retains many of the same characteristics, such as intensive marketing campaigns and a marked dichotomy between critical reaction and audience reception. In addition to these elements, I propose the following characteristics as key to the megamovical genre: [1] a narrative that is derived from a film that predates the musical, [2] an overwhelming emphasis on spectacle, which frequently attempts to create a cinematic experience on stage and is typically full of sensory-overloading elements, [3] a primarily pop-orientated score, often compiled from a range of disparate sources, [4] an attempt to superimpose significant cultural relevance onto an narrative that many critics view as superficial and fragmented, often with the use of popular references, [5] all of which are aimed at an audience who would not normally attend a traditional musical theatre show, therefore maximising box-office returns. The attempt to be simultaneously visually spectacular, aurally popular, at least superficially philosophically meaningful or challenging, and culturally relevant often results in [6] many eclectic and heterogeneous elements.

In this Chapter, I will examine the way that each of these characteristics are displayed in King Kong: A Music Theatre Event I will then look at other recent musicals that display similar characteristics, suggesting that rather than simply being an isolated example, King Kong can be seen as an early example of an emerging new genre.

1. Narrative based on film
The books of movicals are, unsurprisingly, often closely related to the original film on which they are based, with much of the dialogue taken directly from the movie, and key phrases and famous quotes (or kernels, to use Chatman’s term) from the film repeated and emphasised in the staged show. For example, in the musical of Strictly Ballroom, the character Shirley Hastings yells the famous line “come on number 100” not once, but twice, earning a round of applause from the audience each time. Despite the connection with the preceding (and usually very popular) film, the books of movicals are often straightforward and relatively simplistic, and the narrative does not challenge the audience as much as the plots of the original megamusicals. Consequently, there is

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2 Sternfeld, The Megamusical, 1.
limited character development in the narrative, nor is there much explanation of the characters histories or motivations. There are also often numerous inconsistencies, minimal emotional connection with (and between) the characters, and a lack of narrative momentum. As discussed below, this narrative fragmentation comes from a focus on visual elements, which can be used to communicate narrative information with the audience.

The reviews of *King Kong* often touched on this poor character development and the lack of emotional connection, particularly between Kong and Ann. While some reviewers found the relationship between Kong and Ann convincing—Kate Herbert, for example, noted that ‘Ann and Kong’s rapport is central to this show’s success and director, Daniel Kramer, effectively shapes their connection into a genuinely poignant, heartfelt and credible relationship’—most did not. Cassidy Knowlton’s opinion was more typical:

> Characters are somewhat one-dimensional, and they are given no time to form relationships. Even Darrow and Kong don’t seem to have enough time to form a realistic bond, and as the entire plot from that point forward hangs on their relationship it is a shame that they aren’t given much space to breathe.

Instead of the characters being fully realised, audience members are expected to draw upon their knowledge of the story from the films. Anne-Marie Peard provided a cutting, but accurate summary of *King Kong*:

> There’s a plot based on assuming the audience know King Kong’s film story, but it’s filled with illogical leaps, clunky dialogue and the melodrama of unearned emotion. It feels like it was written around the spectacle (during a tech run, before previews). Kong deserves some writers. They don’t have to be expensive, award-winning writers, just writers who know story and how to tell story in theatre. People who know a foreshadowing monkey has to come back; that unearned kisses don’t create love; that if a guy sings a song about Lady Liberty,

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his story should be about liberty; and that long-legged women don’t fill plot holes.⁵

Charlotte Moore of Limelight agreed, but added:

One can’t help but feel that the show suffers from a serious case of trying too hard to impress. Worryingly, it is the two key ingredients of musical theatre – the score and the book, that fare the worse... the production really seems to lack a real heart, as it veers between the monster puppet and the rest of the story, loosely tacked together and dependent upon the audience’s prior knowledge of the King Kong legend.⁶

Instead of propelling the narrative, the plot of the King Kong musical mostly functioned as a foundation for stunts and other visually spectacular events, which dominated the staged show. In megamovicals more generally, an overwhelming emphasis is placed on the visual design of the musical in an attempt to create and imitate a cinematic experience in a live show. Consequently, the narrative becomes a secondary, or even tertiary concern, with critics commenting on its superficiality and blandness while the music becomes largely incidental.

2. Spectacle
Large, sophisticated sets have been a primary feature of the megamusical genre since its inception. However, many ‘regular’ musicals now also feature lavish sets, which is indicative of a general push for modern Broadway musicals to be big, expensive and stimulating. For example, the 2012 musical Rocky, which was not described as a megamusical by critics in any of the major newspapers that typically review Broadway shows, featured a highly choreographed fight scene that took place in a boxing ring that was moved into the audience during the second act. Likewise, the 2015 revival of The King and I featured a full-scale ship onstage; and in The Curious Incident in the Night, the set features three blank walls on which images and words could be projected; and so on.

The spectacle exhibited in King Kong was widely agreed to be outstanding, and was the main drawcard for the show. Most critics raved about the technology behind the

⁶ Charlotte Moore, Limelight, 26 July 2013.
The animatronic-cum-puppetry of Kong, describing it as ‘jaw-dropping’, ‘glorious and unforgettable’, and a ‘technologically sophisticated confection for the senses that you'll never forget’. Anne-Marie Peard of Aussie Theatre claimed, '[Kong's] breath-taking magnificence is reason alone to see this show'. Kate Herbert of The Herald Sun, stated: ‘when King Kong first emerges from the dim mists of Skull Island, roaring and beating his chest he has the audience gaping in awe. The six-metre Kong is the runaway star of this new musical’. Cameron Woodhead described Kong as ‘a massive and magical creation. Eyes will pop, jaws will drop – there’s no doubt about that’. The visual elements of the show, spectacular as they were, were not, however, seen to make up for the poor narrative.

Vagelis Siropoulos discussed this emphasis on visual elements over the narrative in detail in his article “Megamusicals, spectacle and the postdramatic aesthetics of late capitalism”. Siropoulos has written numerous articles about the history and use of ‘spectacle’ in musical theatre, much of which is a continuation of Sternfeld’s discussion in her 2006 book, The Megamusical. Like Sternfeld, Siropoulos often focuses on the original megamusicals (Les Misérables, The Phantom of the Opera, etc.) as examples. He suggests that the attention to performance over the narrative has been described as postmodernist or postdramatic theatre. He argues that the ‘spectacularisation’ that we now frequently see in megamusicals is perhaps not surprising, as it reflects the proliferation of advanced technology that we see in modern culture. Siropoulos also suggests many modern musicals, in particular megamusicals, feature a sort of hyperspace in which audiences are bomarded with audio-visual thrills, and are thus freed from (or do not obey) narrative linearity. Instead, audiences are presented with visual fragments that—in the case of MTV and blockbuster movies, for example—communicate narrative information by visual means. In another article, Siropoulos elaborates on this fragmentation:

10 Woodhead, “King Kong”, 15 June 2013.
The aim is to overwhelm the senses through a relentless succession of disjointed moments of the highest possible aesthetic density...the spectator is...encouraged to indulge in an intense sensory, synaesthetic experience that approaches the state of dream and hallucination. This dream-like and hallucinatory sensation is further accentuated by the symbolic density of the imagery employed and the intertextual references to a variety of mass-culture texts".\(^{12}\)

Many topics in Siropoulos’ article are also applicable to \textit{King Kong}. Audiences were certainly subjected to a relentless succession of sensory-overloaded moments. Moreover, the use of new technology reflects the proliferation of technology in modern Australian society and \textit{King Kong} had many references to mass-culture text.

\section*{3. Pop-oriented score}

Perhaps the most distinguishable difference between megamovicals and their megamusical predecessors and contemporaries, however, are the scores, which feature a wide array of musical styles, often disconnected from each other. The scores of megamovicals often either resemble a compilation score for a film rather than a traditional musical theatre show, or are written by popular artists, or both. Compilation film scores typically feature self-contained popular works that attempt to integrate multiple non-diegetic songs with a linear narrative.\(^{13}\) As each song is self-contained, there is little sense of an overarching trajectory in the music, with climaxes, ballads, reprises, and so on.

Popular artists (i.e. pop stars) contributing to Broadway shows is not a new phenomenon, but more and more pop stars are being employed either to contribute songs or write the entire score for musicals: e.g. \textit{The Last Ship} by Sting, \textit{Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark} written by Bono and The Edge, \textit{Ghost: The Musical} by Dave Stewart from the Eurhythmis, \textit{Finding Neverland} by Gary Barlow, 9 to 5 by Dolly Parton, \textit{Waitress} by Sara Bareilles, and so on. While there are exceptions—Cyndi Lauper, for example, won a Tony Award for Best Original Score in 2013 for her work on \textit{Kinky Boots}\(^{14}\)—the songs contributed by these popular artists are often, unsurprisingly, very similar to their own


\(^{13}\) Mervyn Cook, \textit{A History of Film Music} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 409.

\(^{14}\) “Cyndi Lauper”, \textit{The Official Website of the American Theatre Wing’s Tony Awards}, \url{http://www.tonyawards.com/p/tonys_search} (accessed 21 December 2015).
works, and can be ill suited to a large-scale musical. Scores written by popular artists, many of whom have no experience writing for Broadway musicals, often have few (if any) motifs or character-specific music, nor meaningful reprises of musical material. When musical material is repeated, it is often used more as a time-filler e.g. during set changes, than to develop character or complexity. The inclusion of popular songs and the employment of popular artists is intended to appeal to the general public, making the music accessible to a wider and larger audience, which in turn results in greater financial gain.

The score for *King Kong* featured music from the 1920s, 1930s, 1970s, 2000s, 2010s, as well as music intended for religious ceremonies. As Vicki Frost stated in an extended article for *The Guardian*:

> There’s little cohesion and the stuff gluing the interesting [musical] numbers together often seems from another show altogether. Commitment wanders and the by-numbers ballads creep in. Or the show suddenly chucks in a Beyoncé-style number out of nowhere.15

The anthology of popular works in *King Kong* had very little continuity or consistency, and did not appear to be communicating unspoken aspects of a character. Instead, the lyrics had a narrative stasis. Although the music in *King Kong* provided some historical and political detail (mostly in the use of music from the 1920s and '30s), it was primarily ‘empathetic’ or reflective (i.e. music that aligns with a character’s emotions) rather than expository.16 Unlike the 1933 film, the 2005 remake (which featured most of Steiner’s original score), or most of the earlier megamusicals, *King Kong* featured very little recurring musical material, no leitmotifs, and no transitional or linking material. Max Steiner’s score for the 1933 film (discussed in Chapter 3) featured leitmotifs for Kong and Ann, as well as a love theme between Ann and Jack. In the staged show, however, Kong and Ann’s musical material was not only unrelated, but their songs were stylistically incompatible: Ann performs ballads, whilst Kong’s theme song, “Genesis” (the only music in the show that is associated with a character), is electro-dub-step. Yet, the relationship between Ann and Kong is the backbone of the narrative. Their musical


incompatibility in the staged show, coupled with the absence of motivic material, created a disconnection between the characters, and furthermore, did not equip audiences with anything more than a superficial understanding of the characters’ desires or motivations.\textsuperscript{17}

This lack of musical consistency did not go unnoticed by the critics. As Knowlton stated:

[The songs] were written independently by different pop stars, and the lack of coherence is jarring... the production relies much more on its spectacular dancers and staging than on powerful music.\textsuperscript{18}

Anne-Marie Peard expressed similar sentiments:

The music is forgettable. It’s not boring, but it doesn’t move the story, show character or add much more than a beat for the spectacle that it’s supporting... the music could be removed from the show without affecting the story. I can’t name a long-running or award-winning show that can say the same.\textsuperscript{19}

It is also interesting to note that unlike its megamusical predecessors, the music in 	extit{King Kong} did not have an extended life outside of the live show, at least during its Melbourne run. Cast recordings of musicals have become a standard feature for musical theatre shows since 	extit{Oklahoma!} in the 1950s, and have been released prior to the premiere of shows since Andrew Lloyd Webber’s 1971 musical 	extit{Jesus Christ Superstar}. As discussed in Chapter 1, cast recordings function not only as merchandise, but also as a form of advertisement: audiences can familiarise themselves with the music before viewing a show. For 	extit{King Kong}, however, the pre-existing works that were used in the show are only available to consumers via independent third parties, such as iTunes, or YouTube, but not in connection to the musical. These songs were featured on the 	extit{King Kong} website, but that site was removed when the show closed.

The similarities between a compilation film score and the music in 	extit{King Kong} are perhaps not surprising, as many members of the creative team have experience in film.

\textsuperscript{17} Sternfeld, 	extit{The Megamusical}, 27.
\textsuperscript{18} Knowlton, “REVIEW: King Kong”, 17 June 2013.
\textsuperscript{19} Peard, “Oh King Kong!”, 16 June 2013.
Composer and arranger Marius de Vries has worked extensively on films, notably a number of Baz Luhrmann’s projects, including the BAFTA-winning collaborative team for *Romeo + Juliet*. De Vries has also been an arranger and producer for many well-known popular artists, including Madonna, Bjork, David Bowie, Annie Lennox, U2, Massive Attack, and Josh Groban. The choreographer for *King Kong*, John O’Connell, also worked with Luhrmann on all his films including the Red Curtain Trilogy, *Australia*, and *The Great Gatsby*. Craig Lucas has not only written a number of books for Broadway shows has also written a number of screenplays.

The score of *King Kong* was certainly distinguishable – almost every song had a different musical style meaning any motivic repetition became the exception, not the norm, bucking the trend of earlier megamusicals.

4. Superficiality

As megamovicals place more and more emphasis on a cinematic experience, they are arguably becoming increasingly superficial. There is, however, an attempt to superimpose a greater depth to the narrative by associating the show with social issues in modern society, perhaps as a means of camouflaging what is considered by many a blatant money-making enterprise as well as an attempt to legitimise the extravagance of the show. However, the underlying messages are often barely discernible by the majority of the audience. For example, *Strictly Ballroom*, directed by Baz Luhrmann, features a scene in which the male company perform with cassock hats, and dance traditional Russian movements. This song is a form of commentary on the Cold War and Russian’s dictatorship, yet, this concept—one that could generate significant debate given recent world events—was not addressed in any reviews, nor was it mentioned in the extensive musical description in the programme. As discussed extensively in Chapter 5, the *King Kong* musical was rife with symbolic imagery and underlying commentary, from lynched natives to the use of the Lady Liberty. The preceding *King Kong* films had even more underlying commentary (discussed in Chapter 3), with each film acting somewhat as a microcosm of its contemporary society. In the musical, however, the underlying commentary was undiscernible amongst the flashing lights and chaotic soundtrack.

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5. Box-office success

The attempt to maximise box-office returns seems to be the driving force behind modern megamovicals. *New York Show Tickets* summarises: ‘Rather than spreading the money around, producing lots of shows and hoping most of them enjoy a modest profitable run, Broadway producers now sink more money into few properties and hope that one of them will be the Broadway megamusical of the future.’²¹ If successful, a Broadway show will amass huge financial gain. For example, *The Lion King*—the most financially successful megamusical in history—grossed US $6.2 billion worldwide by 2014 (to put this into perspective, the highest grossing film, *Avatar*, grossed US $2.8 billion worldwide by 2014).²² Conversely, a Broadway musical can be just as financially unsuccessful, particularly movicals, megamusicals, and megamovicals, which are heavily reliant on grandiose (and expensive) elements.

Perhaps ironically, megamovicals are often too big to gain unprecedented international financial success, like the original megamusicals. Although megamovicals may be financially successful during their Broadway run, these shows are often too big to travel. *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark*, for example, remains the highest grossing show on Broadway in one week (over $3 million), but has not yet been able to tour, either domestically or internationally, as it requires a very large space to accommodate the acrobatic performers.

6. Eclecticism

With the focus on financial profit, megamovicals have attempted to be simultaneously visually spectacular, aurally popular, culturally relevant, and philosophically meaningful, resulting in numerous eclectic, heterogeneous, and at times, conflicting, elements. In *King Kong* for example, we see multiple Christian references (discussed at length in Chapter 5), yet the story also has Cassandra, a Greek mythological character. Neither the Christian references, nor the Greek mythology, are explicitly present in the original film, or any of the remakes, nor are these elements part of the central storyline.

²¹ “The Advent of the Broadway Mega Musical”, *New York Show Tickets*,
http://www.nytiix.com/Links/Broadway/Articles/megamusicals.html.

²² “‘The Lion King’ musical breaks box office record with $6.2 billion worldwide”, *New York Daily News*, 22 September 2014. Interestingly, according to this article, the success of *The Lion King* is due, at least in part, to the ‘movie tie-in, simple-to-understand story, [and] family friendly themes.’
They do, however, supplement an underlying commentary. As Vicki Frost, a journalist for *The Guardian*, summarised:

"King Kong has so much to say, often in interesting ways, that it gabbles and fluffs its lines. And for a new musical on this scale, particularly one launching with such fanfare, that's a problem that can't be ignored."\(^{23}\)

Of course, certain scenes from films are either impossible to recreate on stage or perhaps best avoided, which can lead to eclectic or inconsistent elements in the show. Scenes in films can be created using special effects, be it models like the original *King Kong* movie or computer generated imagery like the 2005 remake. In staged shows, however, these scenes need to be implied. For example, the most well-known scene of the original movie in which Kong climbs the Empire State Building could not be literally recreated on stage; instead the creators had to imply Kong's ascent, and did so by using projections of windows on the curtain. Likewise, the stage could not accommodate planes circling and shooting at Kong atop the Empire State building. Instead, streaking lights on the LED screen were used to depict the aircrafts. This particular scene demonstrated a clear filmic influence on the musical: the show changes almost instantly from being visually dominant with flashing lights, and the high volume and chaotic sound of the approaching and shooting planes, to musically dominant – Gorecki's "Amen Opus 35" – with no sound other than the "Amen" from the chorus and very few visual cues, not the mention the sudden slow-motion of the characters.

The continuity in the *King Kong* musical was further complicated by the many differences between the preceding films. The creators had to selectively choose various scenes from the three preceding films, which could be reproduced on stage without adversely affecting the new subtext (discussed in Chapter 5). Combining these selected scenes with original concepts (so as to make the musical relevant to modern audiences) resulted in some unusual elements. For example, Ann’s relationship with Kong appears to be influenced by all three preceding films: she is fearful at first, like in the original 1933 film, but becomes fiery, entering into a screaming match with Kong in his lair like the 1976 film, before attempting to protect him in the final scene atop the Empire State building; a scene that imitates the 2005 film.

Despite these considerable reservations, the critics saw potential in *King Kong*—something that managed to rise above the show’s indisputable limitations and that was pushing the genre in a new direction. Anne-Marie Peard, whose pointed reviews cut straight to the issues in the show, concluded ‘there is so much jaw-dropping, razzle-dazzle magnificence on the stage that it’s already changing the rules’. 24 Cameron Woodhead of The Age, exclaimed: ‘You can taste the future in this unique and visionary theatrical event, and it’s mind-blowing’. 25 The critics even saw potential in the heavily criticised score:

[The music is] a dog’s breakfast with a distinct absence of hummable numbers, but the mélange of patter songs, pop ballads, classic Broadway show tunes and eerie electronica remains a viable and intriguing experiment. 26

Frost agreed: ‘There’s such a bold vision here, such an exciting theatrical proposition, that it’s exasperating that it isn’t fully realised’. 27 Evidently, despite the considerable criticism that the show received, critics still believed the show could be successful.

Other megamovicals

Following the criteria set above, it is possible that *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* began the megamovical’ trend, as it signalled a change in the focus of musicals from narrative to overwhelming film-like spectacle. The show was preceded by one of the most financially successful film franchises in history (the trilogy was released in 2002, 2004, and 2007), which was itself based on a popular comic. 28 *Spider-Man* the musical is the most expensive musical on Broadway in history, at a cost of US $75 million. 29 The

26 Woodhead, “King Kong”, 15 June 2013.
28 A number of earlier *Spider-Man* films and television series were produced, however, none received as much acclaim as the trilogy (directed by Sam Raimi). In 2012 (one year after the musical premiered), a rebooted version titled *The Amazing Spider-Man* was released (directed by Marc Webb and starring Emma Stone and Andrew Garfield). A sequel to this film was released in 2014.
show did not open until over a year after the proposed original opening date and had 182 preview performances, the most in history.\(^{30}\) The musical’s premiere was delayed numerous times, and it then temporarily closed due to injuries to performers. After finally reopening, the show received such a poor reviews that it was closed again for reworking (during which Julie Taymor, the original director, was fired and subsequent legal disputes occurred) only to be reopened to poor (but marginally better) reviews.\(^{31}\)

Taymor (who won a Tony Award for her direction of *The Lion King*) envisioned a musical that had strong ties to Greek mythological characters, specifically Arachne. Consequently, much of the narrative from the comic books and preceding films were abandoned. Critics reviled the original show (dubbed Spidey 1.0), describing it as the worst musical in history.\(^{32}\) Yet, when Taymor was fired and the show was rewritten (Spidey 2.0), certain elements from Taymor’s original production were retained. Arachne, for example, became a god-like figure for Peter Parker, guiding him through his metamorphosis. As a result, Spidey 2.0 combined elements from the original comic books with Taymor’s vision creating a plethora of anachronistic and heterogeneous elements.

The staging and sets for the show attempted to recreate some of the special effects of the film, including stunt-men dressed in Spiderman-suits and a hover craft driven by the Green Goblin flying around the stage; a collapsible Chrysler building placed on an angle to suggest the action was taking place at the top of the building; and large screens used to project and magnify images such as the various villains.

The score was composed by rock musicians Bono and The Edge, who at the time had no experience composing a Broadway musical. Their music, which more closely resembled a film soundtrack than a musical score, had very little, if any, motivic, linking, transitional, or reoccurring material. The score was almost unanimously criticised in reviews for being bland. David Cote, for *Time Out New York* magazine stated: ‘only half the songs [in Spider-Man] are engaging on a musical or lyrical level. Several numbers could easily have been cut to reduce the 160-minute running time and allow for more

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narrative connective tissue’. As Cote suggests, the narrative was similarly poor, and often incomplete. Yet, as reviewers surmised, the emphasis of the show was not on the book or score, but the spectacle. As Terry Teachout, for *The Wall Street Journal* wrote: ‘The show’s sheer visual dynamism is staggering – but except for one great performance, it has little else to offer’. Another review by Patrick Healy and Kevin Flynn for *The New York Times* provided a damning yet accurate summary of the history of the show:

*Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* once envisioned as a [US] $25 million musical...is now the most expensive ever. Four members have been injured, one seriously. Three lead actors left. Flying scenes have regularly malfunctions. Money nearly ran out at one point. Reviews have been terrible, and some actors are trying to get out of their contracts early.

Yet, despite the criticisms, the show maintained high audience attendance and weekly grosses. *Spider-Man* holds the record for both the most costly show on Broadway, but also highest grosses in a week, with over US $3 million. In total the show has grossed over US $212 million.

This supports Laird’s hypothesis that musicals pitched at audience members who were generally unconcerned by the opinions of critics can be successful in the face of critical failure. Reports by *The Broadway League* support such a theory: their report for the 2011–2012 season, during which *Spider-Man* premiered, revealed that 63.4% of audience members at Broadway shows were tourists; the 2012–2013 report has similar figures with tourists purchasing 66% of tickets. The 2012–2013 season also had the highest percentage (23%) of international tourists attending musicals, all of whom

would be largely unfamiliar with the negative coverage of the show, and perhaps drawn to a narrative with which they were familiar.\textsuperscript{39}

When \textit{King Kong: A Music Theatre Event} was created and opened in Melbourne in 2013, exhibiting many similar traits, \textit{Spider-Man} no longer seemed to be an isolated anomaly. Within two years, two very different shows with numerous similarities had been produced and premiered on opposite sides of the world, suggesting the emergence of a new trend in musical theatre. Both \textit{Spider-Man} and \textit{King Kong} placed significant emphasis on the use of advanced technology and had a popular score written by popular artists. Furthermore, both shows were the most expensive musicals produced in their respective countries, and received relatively poor reviews yet remained popular with audiences. Furthermore, the subject of both shows was a fictitious character that had become firmly embedded in American culture. When rumours first began about \textit{King Kong’s} transferal to New York City, many critics drew parallels between the show and \textit{Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark}, commenting on their common grandness of scale, cost, and emphasis on special effects. Comparisons between the two shows increased when \textit{Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark} closed in January 2014, and it was revealed that the Lyric Theatre (formerly the Foxwood Theatre) was one of the only theatres capable of housing the enormous Kong. Yet, as Patrick Healy of \textit{The New York Times} noted, ““Kong” is eager to avoid comparisons to “Spider-Man”, a $75 million flop’.\textsuperscript{40}

Since \textit{King Kong’s} premiere a number of other musicals have been produced that exhibit elements of the megamovical, and that suggest, rather than being a one-off experiment, it represents an emerging trend.

In June 2013, the musical version of \textit{Charlie and the Chocolate Factory} premiered on West End, directed by Sam Mendes with music and lyrics by Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman, who wrote the musical \textit{Hairspray}. The show is preceded by two well-known films (created in 1971 and 2005), both of which are based on a children’s novel by Roald Dahl. Although the show certainly appears to meet the criteria for a megamovical, it was more positively received than \textit{King Kong}. Arwa Haider, for example, wrote for \textit{Metro}:

\textsuperscript{39} “The Demographic of the Broadway Audience 2012-2013”, \textit{The Broadway League},
\textsuperscript{40} Patrick Healy, ““King Kong’ Out, ‘On the Town’ In, At Foxwood Theatre – Now Renamed the Lyric”, \textit{New York Times}, 6 March 2014.
“director Sam ‘Skyfall’ Mendes combines the blockbuster-movie prowess with solid theatre grounding”. The show appeared, however, to be very confused; the story was updated with popular references (YouTube, Twitter, etc.) but also retained many references to the preceding films. Many critics noted this awkwardness; praising the innovative sets, but criticising the book and score in a way that was strongly reminiscent of some of the reception of *King Kong*. Michael Billington of *The Guardian* stated, ‘Although there’s been much talk of the technical challenges involved in bringing the book to the stage, the real difficulty lies in preserving the story’s humility amid a welter of special effects’. Charles Spencer of *The Telegraph* expressed similar sentiments: ‘the sets are massive, the special effects amazing...yet it rarely touches the heart or stimulates the imagination’. Ben Brantley of *The New York Times*, provided one of the most scathing reviews of the show:

>This blindingly flashy new musical...is as jammed with games and gadgets as Toys “R” Us warehouse. Behemoth playthings are forced upon you in such relentless abundance that you wind up feeling like a spoiled, benumbed child on Christmas morning, drowning in a sea of presents and yearning to flee back to bed.

The score for *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* drew on a wide range of musical styles. Each character was assigned a different musical style: the perpetually hungry and rotund Augustus Gloop and his mother, Mrs Gloop, imitated Bavarian yodelling; the obnoxious and tyrannical Veruca Salt and her oily businessman father from London evoked waltzes; the manic Mike Teavee and his mother, Mrs Teavee (who is at her wits end trying to manage Mike’s ADHD tendencies), had futuristic synthesised music reminiscent of gaming music; and the American Violet Beauregard, or the ‘double bubble duchess’ as she refers to herself, imitated 1980s rap.

With its transfer to Broadway in early 2017, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory: A New Musical* underwent a number of changes, including the insertion of the beloved song “The Candy Man” from the original film. More popular references were also added with

41 Arwa Haider, “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory’s Latest Adaptation is a Delectable Treat”, *Metro*, 26 June 2013.
Mike TV being a twitter addict, and Violet Beauregard a YouTube sensation. Furthermore, the set was significantly downgraded from a brightly colourful and sensory-overloaded set to a more conventional style.

On 12 April 2014, *Strictly Ballroom* premiered at the Lyric Theatre, Sydney Australia, directed by Baz Luhrmann and produced by Global Creatures (headed by Carmen Pavlovic). There are strong connections between *King Kong* the Musical and Luhrmann’s work. Most of the creative team for *King Kong* worked with Luhrmann on his award winning films, and there are numerous similarities. Both *King Kong* and *Strictly Ballroom* are based on a classic narratives but have been modernised using a wide variety of pop-songs as well as religious works, symbolic visual elements, broad comedy, hyper stylized scenes, discontinuity of time, vivid colours, and so on, resulting in a red-curtain cinematic style that is at times overwhelming, disorientating, and kitsch. Academic Pam Cook, writes that Luhrmann’s films

Rel[y] on honed-down classical storytelling and simplified characters; they rework boundaries of genre; they emphasise image and music; they abound with knowing references to other movies and media; they are design-led, tying in their distinctive visual and aural style to channels of communication spanning television video games, DVD, CDs, the press, publishing and the Internet; and they feature big-name stars and spectacular display—all of which is geared to maximising box-office returns and ancillary revenues.45

Many of these traits can also be found in *King Kong* and the megamovical more generally, in particular, the references to other forms of media. Luhrmann’s films are often associated with MTV and its fragmented style, whereas *King Kong* turned to cinema for inspiration. Unlike Luhrmann’s films, however, *King Kong* does not appear to embrace the inevitable absurdity or surrealism of placing a giant puppet on stage; instead it is as if the creative team hoped the audience would simply overlook the many incongruous elements.

Despite their similarities, Luhrmann’s unusual style—which became his *modis operandi*—was applauded when used on screen, whereas *King Kong’s* was not. Each interpolation in Luhrmann’s films carried with it connotations relating to the original

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Consequently, he was able to draw numerous popular references into a central narrative. That narrative featured strong characters and a story that was grounded in love, death, and romance. As Viertel proclaimed, "It's crucial you have a character whose own decisions and whose own passions drive the story forward": an element that the critics consistently flagged as a failure in the *King Kong* musical.

*Strictly Ballroom* featured numerous popular songs with additional works written by popular artists Eddie Perfect and Sia. The show also featured some classical music, notably, the Habanera by Georges Bizet, for which alternative lyrics were written. The narrative of *Strictly Ballroom* remained very similar to the original film (also directed and co-written by Luhrmann) but with famous quotations repeated, so as to highlight these quotable lines from the show for the audience’s nostalgia. At several points in the musical, the set and staging explicitly referred to cinematic techniques: at one point the set was moved closer to the audience to imitate a camera zooming in on the actor, another scene featured a rotating set, allowing the audience to see (or hear) what was happening both on the dance floor and behind the curtain, like the original film.

The reviews for *Strictly Ballroom* did not necessarily agree that the show was particularly unique, but Luhrmann himself was adamant that the musical would be pushing theatrical boundaries. He is quoted as saying, 'if we are not actually breaking new theatrical ground with it, than at my age, why would you bother?'.

*Strictly Ballroom* featured a much smaller set than the aforementioned works, yet, its connections with, and reliance on, the preceding films was evident. Like the highly criticised musical, *Dirty Dancing*, this musical capitalised on an audience's nostalgia and desire to re-experience the film in a live setting. As mentioned earlier, there was an attempt to create a serious subtext to the narrative, but that commentary remains, largely, unnoticed by critics or audiences.

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When *King Kong: A Music Theatre Event* premiered in Melbourne, Australia, in June 2013, audiences were eager to see the much-hyped musical based on one of the most iconic characters in history: the almighty Kong! For months leading up to the premiere, newspapers reported on the progress of the show and announced castings and developments in the creative process, and an aggressive advertising campaign dominated Melbourne screens, newspapers, and many public spaces. Audiences and critics were curious: how were the creators of this musical going to produce an emotional, protective, and territorial, but also—perhaps most importantly—believable giant gorilla? In the three main films, Kong (and the dinosaurs) was so colossal that computer-generated imagery or models were required to create the exaggerated reality of Skull Island. How were the creators of the musical going to replicate this giant character in a live show? The creation of the puppet-cum-animatronic Kong was masterful: the musical succeeded in capturing some of the best characteristics of Kong from the preceding films. Kong was huge, intimidating, he moved and acted like a silverback gorilla, and was surprisingly emotional. The character of Kong was the drawcard of the show. But the puppetry and mechanics of Kong was one of the few positive features of the musicals. What was promised to be a fantastical and wonderful modern work based on a well known narratives in history was instead heavily criticised for being superficial and heterogeneous. Surely a big-budget show that was modelled on highly successful megamusical predecessors and produced by an experienced and awarded team had all the makings to be the next big hit?

Although *King Kong* had many of the features of a megamusical, it bore little resemblance to the forefathers of the genre, such as *Les Misérables* or *The Phantom of the Opera*. These successful shows were epic, dramatic, and grand in both scale and content, but remained firmly grounded in traditional musical theatre practices. The *King Kong* musical, on the other hand, was more like a film on stage than a traditional musical theatre work and the soundscape of the show, which comprised a series of self-contained popular works, was more like a compilation score for a film. Typical megamusical elements, such as a sung-through score and a serious narrative that depicts lofty sentiments, have, for the most part, been abandoned in favour of visual spectacle, which tends to dominate the show. New and exciting technology has become the focus of such shows, appealing to increasingly bigger (but perhaps less well informed) audiences. More often than not, critics condemn the book and score, commenting on their heterogeneity and general awkwardness. Yet, as both Paul R. Laird
and Jessica Sternfeld have argued, the opinions of the critics are, by and large, redundant. This is particularly pertinent to megamovicals, which seek to capitalise on an audience’s familiarity and nostalgia with a narrative. Consequently, megamovicals are becoming more and more desirable for both producers and audiences, as they are considered safer investments of both money and time. As the cost of producing a show on Broadway increases, so does the price of tickets. As a result, audiences who want a fail-safe investment turn to a narrative with which they are familiar. As King Kong proved, the lure of familiarity and the promise of the spectacular draws audiences to shows, regardless of weak elements of the show and poor reviews by critics.

King Kong: Alive on Broadway

At the time of submission, King Kong: A Musical Theatre Event has not yet premiered on Broadway. Since its Melbourne run, a revolving door of creative team members has been employed in preparation for its Broadway premiere. The original director, Daniel Kramer was replaced by Eric Shaeffer, known for his work on the musicals Gigi and Follies. Shaeffer was then replaced by director-choreographer Drew McOnie who worked on the UK production of Strictly Ballroom. Craig Lucas, who wrote the original book was replaced by Marsha Norman, who won a Pulitzer prize for her work on the play night Mother. Norman was then replaced by Jack Thorne who wrote the highly acclaimed West End hit Harry Potter and the Cursed Child. Jason Robert Brown (who worked with Norman on The Bridges of Madison Country) was employed to collaborate with Marius de Vries on the score; however, he was subsequently replaced by Australian composer and performer, Eddie Perfect (who also worked on Strictly Ballroom). The employment of Robert Brown and Norman could suggest intent to create a more homogenised score and book for its Broadway run to reflect Brown’s previous works (Bridges of Madison Country, The Last Five Years, etc.), which are very different to the music presented in King Kong. In a 2015 interview with Playbill, Robert Brown stated:

I’m primarily there just to write a few songs for the characters. There’s a whole lot of music that already exists for King Kong that’s really exciting...What Marsha and I are there to do is give the humans some life, because I think they weren’t particularly alive in the Australian version...we’re trying to make sure the show
is not just about how great that big puppet is, but to make sure that all the people who surround it are the people you root for and care for.\textsuperscript{48}

The employment of Drew McOnie and Eddie Perfect, both of whom worked on \textit{Strictly Ballroom}—a show that also featured many eclectic and heterogeneous elements—suggests that the show may retain much of its fragmented and cinematic style. According to Pavlovic, however, ‘it isn’t a conventional musical but it certainly still has all the elements of a musical – there is a full orchestra, there are people singing, but there are also great tracks of lyricless score’.\textsuperscript{49} In May 2017, it was revealed that the show would be renamed \textit{King Kong: Alive on Broadway}. It is not clear yet if the musical numbers produced in collaboration with Sarah McLaughlin, Jus\textinterrobang ice, Massive Attack, or The Avalanches will remain in the show. The show is expected to open in late 2018 at the Broadway Theatre.

The influence of Hollywood films will undoubtedly continue to impact Broadway shows. But, whether or not the megamevical will become the next permanent institution on Broadway is yet to be determined. As the megamevical genre stands today, I believe it is likely to peak and then flop in the coming years, unless it undergoes some radical changes. I find it hard to imagine that audiences are going to be happy to continue supporting flashy musicals that are poorly written. I do not believe, however, that the presence of advanced technology in the theatre will wane as quickly as the megamevical genre, if at all. Modern audiences seem to demand something spectacular and unique, be it amazing technology or a rapping historical figure like Alexander Hamilton. For all its faults, the audience were highly impressed by the technology displayed in \textit{King Kong}, and based on this alone, were willing to recommend the show to others. Is \textit{King Kong}, as we have known it going to be the next big hit on Broadway? No. But, it could be. It certainly has all the elements to be the “Greatest Show on Earth”.


\textsuperscript{49} Michael Paulson, “Australia’s ‘King Kong’ is Bound for Broadway, a Bit Late but Just as Big”, \textit{New York Times}, 17 May 2017.
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**Events**

APPENDIX

Songs of King Kong: A Music Theatre Event
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ACT 1

Rise (Prologue)
There is no known publication or recording of this song.

Hunting Season
Lyrics are incomplete. There is no known publication or recording of this song. The following lyrics have been obtained from YouTube. Performed by Carl Denham and company.

New York, New York

I will search this city high and low
And when I see her I will know
That secret magic, X and Y,
That cinematic magnet for the eye

Give me, give me, give me some of that (male company)
**Sweethearts on Parade**

Including songs “Auf Wiedersehen, Darrio” by *Dr. Buzzard’s Original Savannah Band* and “Sweethearts on Parade” composed by Charles Newman and Carmen Lombardo. Performed by the company.

Oh two by two
They go marching through
Oh sweethearts on parade

And how I cried
As they passed me by
Those sweethearts on parade

I’d love to join them but
Well they won’t even look
Cause it takes more than one to join the army of love

So how I pine
Just to fall in line
With those sweethearts on parade

**Sweethearts on parade**

Auf Wiedersehen, Darrio

Performed by Dr. Buzzard’s Original Savannah Band. Composed by Browder Jnr/Darnell.

**Prophesy 1**

Performed by Cassandra. There is no known publication or recording of this song or lyrics.
Brother, Can You Spare A Dime?

Modernised version of the 1932 song composed by Jay Garney with lyrics by E.Y. "Yip" Harburg. Performed by the male company.

They used to tell me I was building a dream
And so I followed the mob
When there was earth to plow or guns to bear
I was always there, right on the job

They used to tell me I was building a dream
With peace and glory ahead
Why should I be standing in line
Just waiting for bread?

Once I built a railroad, I made it run
Made it race against time
Once I built a tower up to the sun
Brick and rivet and lime

Once I built a tower, now it's done
Brother, can you spare a dime?

Once in khaki suits, gee, we looked swell
Full of that Yankee Doodly Dum

Half a million boots went slogging through
Hell
And I was the kid with the drum

Say, don't you remember?
They called me 'Al'

Say buddy, can you spare a dime?

I'm your pal
What’s It Gonna Take?


ACT 1

Since I was a girl
Dreamed of a different life
Far away in the lights
But now I’m here
Staring into the face of the unknown
And who was I to think I could fool them?
When I don’t even know who I am?

What’s it gonna take to make me worthy?
What’s it gonna take to make me strong?
I don’t have much to give
I’ve only just begun to live

So how do I become somebody new?
How do I begin to make it happen?
How will I believe and see this through?
When I feel so unready?
And I feel so alone?

ACT 2

Back on solid ground
My head is spinning round
My heart is in two different worlds
But here I stand
Wondering where I fit into this madness
I thought when I was hoe I’d see clearly
But there so much I don’t understand

What’s it gonna take to light my way?
I had so much to give
I’ve only just begun to live

So how do I begin my life anew?
How do I begin to make this happen?
How do I believe and see this through? ’Cos
I feel like I’m ready
But I still feel so unsure.
I Wanna Be Loved By You
Modernised version of the 1928 song. Music by Herbert Strothart and Harry Ruby with lyrics by Bert Kalmar. Performed by the company

I wanna be loved by you
Just you, nobody else but you
I wanna be loved by you
Alone
Boo-boo-bi-boo
I wanna be kissed by you
Just you, nobody else but you
I couldn’t’ aspire
To anything higher

Colossus
Music composed by 3D from Massive Attack with lyrics by Michael Mitnick. Performed by Carl Denham.

No brazen beast, to tear us away
No dragon defiant, to keep us at bay
Liberty rise, light up the skies
And carry we broken men home

Come, come, torch in the sky
Light up the sea, bring us home

Give me your poor, tired and weak
Your huddled masses
I have what you seek
Beacons of gold, tempests have tossed
Masses to me, and they’re lost
New Colossus
Poem written by Emma Lazaras in 1883 that was inscribed on a plaque that was placed at the feet of the Statue of Liberty. This poem is inspiration for the song "Colossus".

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land,
Here at our sea-washed, sunset-gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch,
Whose flame is the imprisoned lightning, And her name Mother of Exiles.
From her beacon-hand glows world-wide welcome,
Her mild eyes command the air-bridged harbor that twin-cities frame.

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she, with silent lips.
"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lie my lamp beside the golden door!"

http://www.nps.gov/stli/historyculture/upload/new%20colossus%20for%20displaypage2.pdf
Special FX

Music composed by Marius de Vries with lyrics by Marius de Vries and Michael Mitnick. Performed by Ann Darrow and company. Includes song "Pon de Floor" by Major Lazer. Lyrics are incomplete. There is no known publication or recording of this song.

Ann Darrow?
Is that you? (Yeah girl!)
I’ve got a body.
It’s naughty.
And a butt you wanna... (Slaps her bottom)
do that to.
And I got red lips (smacks her lips).
And...thank you...to our ??
And look at these eyes and these thighs
Promise ...???
Look at me.
Look at me.

(Look at me.
Special FX.
Yes, I’m special.
They want a body, that naughty
It’s what they look for.

I’ve got backup dancers!!

So baby flip on that projector
I’m a special FX
Don’t need no story or director,
Just a face that’s perfect
I’m gonna be a force of nature
For the whole world to see
Look at me, look at me.

Pon De Floor

Performed by Major Lazer. Composed by Palmer/Wall/Taylor/Pentz
Perfect

Composed by Guy Garvey and Marius de Vries. Lyrics by Guy Garvey. Lyrics are incomplete. There is no known publication or recording of this song. Performed by Jack Driscoll.

My father and his visionary friends
Were all so vein
And they tell you it's all for the people
And they tell you it's all for the best
Men have died, ten so far
Why did they die?

I picture them
Falling, grasping for nothing

So I'm longing for my father
And his visionary friends

(Jazzy section)
I was perfect
Champagne and dine

Foxtrot

Instrumental piece. Composed by Marius de Vries.

Ritual

Instrumental piece. Composed by Marius de Vries.

Genesis

Instrumental piece. Composed by Justice.
The Ascent
Instrumental piece. Composed by Marius de Vries.

Stress
Instrumental piece. Composed by Justice

In the Face of Forever
Music and lyrics by 3D from Massive Attack, Guy Garvey, Marius de Vries. Performed by Jack Driscoll. Lyrics are incomplete.

In the face of forever
We’re here and then we’re gone
So it’s now, now or never,
To go back, or to go on,
And I see the past so clearly
But I can’t see what’s above
Yet I know, I must follow
I know, I must go on

My heart is pounding
In the face of the unknown
But I will not surrender
To the fear I have.

I’m falling

Poison
Instrumental piece. Composed by Marius de Vries.

Genesis
Instrumental piece. Composed by Justice.
**Full Moon Lullaby**

Music by Marius de Vries with lyrics by Michael Mitnick. Performed by Ann Darrow.

Silence overtaking
Darkness overhead
Shadows now are waking
Monsters in the bed
Bitter hearts are aching
Heaven knows just why
But look, the clouds are breaking
Full moon lullaby

Full moon
Wash it all away

Full moon
Wash it all away

Nightmares overtaking
Rivers dried to mud
Madness now is owing
Poison in the blood
Still we keep on going
Heaven knows just why

But on the wind is blowing
Full moon lullaby
The Chase
Instrumental piece. Composed by Marius de Vries.

Stress
Instrumental piece. Composed by Justice

Capture
Instrumental piece. Composed by Marius de Vries.

Genesis
Instrumental piece. Composed by Justice.
Act 2

Entract
Composed by Marius de Vries.

Greatest Show on Earth
Performed by Carl Denham and female company. Lyrics are incomplete. There is no known publication or recording of this song.

Ladies and Gentlemen
Children of all ages
Step right up!
The greatest show on earth is about to begin.
We have a forty-foot beast of unforetold power
Ladies and Gentlemen
I present to you the eighth wonder of the world,
King Kong!!

(Female chorus members)
King Kong! King Kong!
He’s very very big,
And he’s very very strong
King Kong! King Kong!
King of the jungle
And he’s forty-foot long.

Genesis
Instrumental piece. Composed by Justice.

Prophecy 2
Composed by Marius de Vries. Lyrics by Craig Lucas. Lyrics are incomplete. There is no known publication or recording of this song. Performed by Cassandra.

Blood! Mother! Don’t go in!
Dance With Me


Dance with me,
We can run away
Just dance with me.

A Simple Prayer

Music by Marius de Vries with lyrics by Daniel Kramer, Michael Mitnick, Marius de Vries Performed by Ann Darrow. There is no known publication of these lyrics, which have been obtained from a recording released as a free download.

Subways roll beneath my feet
Buildings scrape the skies above
Snowflakes fall but I cannot move
Is this some kind of dream?
I got the love of a man so perfect and true
A new life can begin, if I choose.
But I sat on top of the world
Held in a hand of a god
And it all seemed clear and new.

Help me, please.
Tell me what do I do
I've seen the devil in man
I've seen an angel too
But he saved my life
He stood for me

Now I'm praying to you
Tell me what happens now,
Tell me how
Coz I just don't know, at all!
Oh, I wanna run, but I'm frozen inside
And my heart's racing out of control
And the thought that is raging inside of my soul (?)
Set him free

It's a simple prayer, hmm.
If you're out there somewhere
It's my turn to stand
Please, show me the way.
**Kill 4 the Thrill**

Composed by Marius de Vries. Lyrics by Daniel Kramer and Marius de Vries. Performed by the company.

**Genesis**

Instrumental piece. Composed by Justice.

**Get Happy**

Modernised version of the 1930 traditional song. Performed by female company. This song was mixed with a pre-recorded *Dies Irae* (see page xviii).

*Pack up your troubles*

*Come on, get happy!*

*You better chase all your cares away!*

*Sing hallelujah!*

*Come on, get happy!*

*Get ready for the judgement day!*

*Get ready.*

*Get ready.*

*Get ready.*

*Get ready.*

*The sun is shining,*

*Come on, get happy!*

*The lord is waiting to take your hand!*

*Shout hallelujah,*

*Come on, get happy!*
Dies Irae
Music by Giuseppe Verdi. Recording played during performances.

\textit{Dies Irae}
\textit{Dies illa}
\textit{Solvet Saeclum in favilla,}
\textit{Teste David cum sybilla}
\textit{Quantus tremor est futurus}
\textit{Quando judex est venturas}
\textit{Cuncta stricte discussurus}

\textbf{English Translation}
\textit{The day of wrath}
\textit{That day}
\textit{Will dissolves the world in ashes}
\textit{As foretold by David and Sibyl}
\textit{How much tremor there will be}
\textit{When the judge will come}
\textit{Investigating everything strictly}\(^1\)

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\(^1\) School Resource Pack, 23.
Rise

Music by Marius de Vries with lyrics by Michael Mitnick. Performed by Cassandra.

A field of grass
One brick is laid
What comes to pass
A home is made
More bricks laid down
Before our eyes
Now there’s a town
We watch it rise

A mother’s needs
A tiny cast
Give into greed
And all is lost
A city born
That grows in size
The prophets mourn
Beware the stars

But once was true
Is far too lies
But what a view
We watch it rise


All the King’s horses
Ride on to new land
What do you know?
The king of the spans
When all the King’s men
Build up their stronghold
Then come the armies x 3
And the Empire falls


We watch it rise.
Rise. Oooh.
Whoa.

Then fall x 3

Amen Opus 35

Composed by Henryk Gorecki. Performed by the Sydney Philharmonia Choirs. Pre-recorded work.

Curtain Call is instrumental version of “Kill 4 the Thrill”
Author/s:
Munro, Rachael

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