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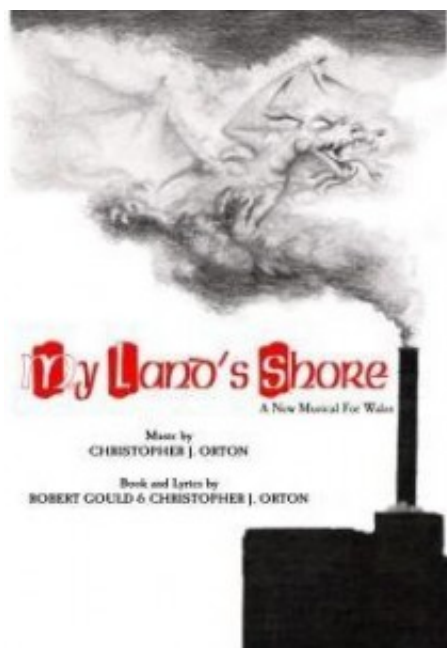
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FEATURE: My Land's Shore



It's Friday morning and I've just arrived at the I.N.C Space, a favoured rehearsal and recording venue in Covent Garden – in fact, rehearsals for West End Bares are currently going on here. Today however, I am here for the ensemble demo recording of the new musical, 'My Land's Shore'.

Walking through, it's easy to see why I.N.C has become so popular; with its light, open rooms and all-white décor, the space has a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere, making you feel instantly at home there and, as I enter the room, I'm met straight away by the composer and co-lyricist for 'My Land's Shore', Christopher Orton. He has been working on the musical since 2001 and, ten years later, is clearly just as impassioned by it as when he began.

'My Land's Shore' is set against the backdrop of the Merthyr Uprising of 1831, one of

the most infamous social events in Welsh history, and inspired by the story of Richard Lewis or, as he was more commonly known, 'Dic Penderyn'; an ordinary miner who became the first martyr of the Welsh working class after being hanged for a crime that he didn't commit.

It is an unashamedly patriotic show. Both Orton and the show's book writer/co-lyricist, Bob Gould are proud Welshmen and most of the West End leading men and ladies that make up their main cast are also born and bred of Wales: Jonathan Williams; Gareth Richards; Mark Evans; Rhiannon Porter and Francesca Jackson – indeed, the only real exception is Kelly-Anne Gower but as she says herself, being married to a Welshman (Jonathan Williams) kind of makes her 'honorary' Welsh!

Today, Orton and Gould are laying down four tracks from 'My Land's Shore' with the ensemble as part of a demo recording. Releasing songs ahead of a production opening has proven to be an effective method of raising awareness and generating interest; it's an approach that Andrew Lloyd-Webber has taken many times, such as with his Phantom sequel 'Love Never Dies'. For a new writer who doesn't have the same financial backing and notoriety that someone like Lloyd-Webber possesses however, a demo recording is also a way to promote themselves and the show, with an eye to drawing in investors and producers and acquiring a platform for it.

Having some big West End names attached to the show is of course, another secret weapon in a promotion campaign, and 'My Land's Shore' certainly has a plentiful arsenal. As they await the arrival of the ensemble members, Orton sits at the piano keys and runs through a few songs with Jonathan Williams, Gareth Richards and Rhiannon Porter, some of the aforementioned main cast members who are recording with the ensemble today. They are not the only West-Enders here today though: along with the musical theatre students and Welsh singers, there are also a number of them making up the ensemble for the recording, including: Dale Evans (Priscilla); Matthew Barrow (Wizard of Oz); Sophie Josslyn (Les Mis) and Katy Treharne (Phantom).

By 11am, most of the ensemble is here, and everyone finds a seat as the day's work begins.

Orton welcomes everyone, giving a quick break-down of what today will entail and introduces Sean James Cameron, who is Executive Producer of Interfusion Films and going to be filming the events of today's recording session.

Before they even begin to rehearse the four songs that are being recorded today, there are a dozen little details that have to be seen to, such as who does and doesn't read sheet music and what voice classifications they have. The latter is troublesome enough on its own, as when Orton asks who in the room is a tenor, every single male singer raises his hand. It gets a laugh however, and is soon sorted by redefining into tenors and 'lower-tenors'.

The first song rehearsal is ‘Make Wales Proud’, an inspiringly patriotic song that’s led by the character of Lewis Lewis, as played by Gareth Richards. Orton arranges the sopranos, the tenors – and the ‘lower-tenors’ – for the split finale and runs through the song with them in sections, first at the piano and then using the backing track. He still makes adaptations to the song as they go if he likes what a particular singer is doing, changing high keys to lower ones and so forth.

Once Orton is satisfied, they move on to ‘Leaders of the Revolution’. It’s clear how well he knows the music and what he wants from the performers as he explains the song’s context in the musical and the emotion behind it. It may sound like it’s all a very long and intense process and in part it is, but while Orton is very specific with what he expects, he’s still willing to take suggestions and reassures people to speak up if they are unsure about their roles, keeping the rehearsal fun and relaxed. Indeed, when Gareth Richards points out a particularly lengthy lyric section and asks when they breathe, Orton quips back, “Never.”

Everyone seems to be getting an instantly good grasp of the songs and there are no real complications as the rehearsal period moves swiftly along. As they progress onto the third song however, the singers are warned that this may prove to be a trickier matter. The title track ‘My Land’s Shore’, which is the musical’s finale song possesses a range of split notes and harmonies and the arrangement of these takes some time to perfect. Once the different vocal roles are assigned, Orton runs through the section with each of them in turn, then gradually adds them in together, going back over it if needed, until he gets them all singing in unison. It takes a lot longer than the previous two songs, but is worth the extra effort as the results are superb.

The final run-through provides a welcome break from the arduous task that the finale song posed. ‘The Trial’ is a short excerpt from a scene in the musical, where Richard Lewis’ case is being tried. Orton separates the ensemble into two groups and directs them into what he describes as a ‘clash’ of notes, but one which works perfectly as the sopranos battle with the lower tones and the increasingly enraged cries of “Hang him! Hang him!” drive home the strength of the scene.

There’s a full run-through of all four songs against the backing tracks before there is a break for lunch, as the sound check is set up ready for recording.

Anyone who suffers the misconception that singing is easy should really sit in on a session like this. An ensemble can sometimes be overlooked, lost in the background of the production, but they put in just as much effort and hard work as anyone else, even more so at times; today really drove home that point.

What struck me most though was the story behind ‘My Land’s Shore’. At first glance, it would be simple to assume that this was a show about Wales, created by Welsh writers for Welsh people. The saying that ‘when you assume you make an ass out of you and me’ couldn’t be more apt here however. The Merthyr Uprising of 1831, around which

'My Land's Shore' is based, is not a tale of Wales against England, it is a tale of social injustice against the working class and the arising conflict that their calls for reform brought about; themes from the nineteenth century which are still present and just as relevant in our own time. The miners and ironworkers of Merthyr Tydfil were protesting against the lowering of wages and loss of jobs – sound familiar? Of course, the poverty that exists for some people in modern society cannot be compared to the poverty they lived in then; the two are worlds apart. We can identify with them however.

I did some research into the '1831 Uprising' before coming to the recording studio to gain as full an understanding of the musical's core as possible. Yes, there is rebellion and riots...revolution! – but there is also so much more, too much to detail here and now. I would urge anyone to go and discover it for themselves instead as there is such a rich and poignant story to be found, in the people involved in the events and the causes that they fought for, as well as the effect it had; not just on the individual participants but the widespread repercussions. The Merthyr Uprising is an important part of history that has touched a lot of people. There have been books written on it, perhaps most notably 'The Fire People' (Alexander Cordell) and songs written (Martyn Joseph), as well as statues erected in the memory of 'Dic Penderyn, this martyr of working men.

'My Land's Shore' is true to the story it was inspired by. To hear Orton and Gould speak about it, and hearing the lyrics they've written, it's quickly apparent that, although retaining a sense of its patriotism, 'My Land's Shore' is not so much a 'musical for Wales' but instead, a musical set in Wales that tells a tale of social unrest, moral dilemmas and heartbreak, concepts that will resonate with anyone, no matter where they are from. Indeed, as one of the show's principals, Mark Evans, wrote in a blog post, "It's very patriotic and I am delighted to be associated with it; but it's also broadly accessible and it should deserve global success from what I've heard of the music."

After lunch, the recording of the four previously rehearsed tracks begins, with Stage Won's Shaun filming the session. There are the inevitable hiccups that occur with every recording, such as keeping pace with the backing track, but all in all it goes very smoothly and, already ahead of schedule, the tracks are laid down and the ensemble are done for the day. After that, some of the principals stay on to record some extra bits and do interviews with Stage Won, but the session is complete, Orton and Gould are very happy with the results and the demo is well on its way.

Before everyone left for the day though, I managed to grab hold of Christopher Orton, Bob Gould and Jonathan Williams for a sit-down about all things 'My Land's Shore':

It was ten years ago you started working on 'My Land's Shore' wasn't



it?

C: Yes, in 2011. I started working on it when I was studying at the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM) in Manchester. I started to look for a subject that I could write my own piece on – it was really just to get my musical theatre fix while I was studying opera – and I found this story. I wanted to write something Welsh, and I found it and started writing it. It took a long time, it was 2005 when it was first tried out so it was a lot of writing it on and off – this was before I knew Bob.

It was in 2006 that you came in wasn't it Bob?

B: Yes, that was when we started working together on a different show, 'Elephant Juice', and another one called 'Based on A True Story'. A few months later, Chris and I were chatting about 'My Land's Shore' and he asked me to have a look and collaborate on it.

C: I knew it needed work. I had written lyrics but I know that, when I look back at what I'd written to what Bob's now put into it – there's no comparison.

Yeah, so Bob came to me originally with this other show and asked me to look at the music, and I said, "No, look at the lyrics for this!"

B: Once I'd heard the music for 'My Land's Shore' I really wanted to work on it, and because it's such a historically important story anyway. I just read through what Chris had already done and restructured the book really. A big change I made was that it was sung-through in the original version and I decided to make it a book musical. We cut a few songs, reworked the lyrics of others to make them work for the characters and scenes in the way I'd written the book, then a lot of new lyrics emerged and Chris wrote the music to that, but we've continued developing it ever since.

You put on a concert of 'My Land's Shore' in 2007 didn't you?

B: Yes, from that we found what worked and what didn't and did a major re-write afterwards, but even up until last week we've still been developing it. We wrote a new song last Friday!

So how much has it changed since the concert?

C: It's definitely grown in maturity. It was always a serious piece but I've developed in the way I write and I'm learning every day; it's not something I've trained in, we just learn off each other. It's a massively different show now. There are some big moments in there which are still the same, you couldn't change them as they're historically accurate.

We had a West End director for the concert, Craig Revel-Horwood, who had a look at it for us and we took a lot of opinions off him.

He described it as the 'Welsh Les Mis' I believe?

C: He did. I don't take offense at that because Les Miserables has done massively well!

J: It does stand on its own though. I think it can easily be compared to Les Mis, as it can to any other musical, but the fact is that it's just better than most musicals.

When did you get involved Jon?

C: Jon's been on board from day one.

J: Chris was in my flat when he finished writing the first song for 'My Land's Shore'! I'd just bought a mixing-desk at the time and it was the first thing we ever laid down, with Chris playing piano and doing string effect on his keyboard and I sang it – lower then though, which is easier! But I've been watching it flourish over the years and have always been excited about it.

C: We've been lucky that Jon's career has gone so brilliantly. We're using him now! He's about to go and do Jesus in 'Godspell'. ([See our Interview with Jon on this matter here](#))

J: Yeah, that's a really cool thing to do. It's their 40th anniversary, so should be good fun. That was the first ever amateur show I did. But to go back to comparing 'My Land's Shore' to Les Mis, I think a lot of people will definitely say they're similar but I know from the stories that it's not a love story, or a story of one man whose background is the revolution; it's a story of one man and the revolution and the people. They'll say that Les Mis is about the people and so on but I'm in Les Mis and, it is about that, but there are stark differences and they're great! It's good that they're different. I'd never turn around and say that one is better than the other, history has shown that Les Mis has

done very well and 'My Land's Shore' could easily, easily, do as well; it just needs the right platform. I truly believe it's just as good.

Since the idea in the beginning and reading about 'Dic Penderyn', I've felt it's a moment of history that needs to be shared. With all the crap that's going on in modern life, just look at when people had pride and community, things like that didn't happen; when they fought, they fought for a cause.

C: It's important to know as well that, people outside of Wales can get behind it.

B: The themes are universal. One of the nights when we did it in Cardiff, two young Scottish friends of mine were sitting next to me and at the end of Act One, the wife of one of them was in floods of tears! So you don't have to be Welsh to be emotionally affected by it.

J: Exactly. It's a revolution in Wales yes, but the major point to make to get it away from being 'Wales against the world', is that it's a story of the real struggle of real people against corrupt authorities.

C: Our 'baddie', as it were, the guy who has to collectively represent the bad side of what was happening, he's Welsh! This is not Wales VS England; it's full of pride and patriotism, but it's also about their struggle with their own kind.

B: There was an Irish immigrant population there too and some of the major characters in the musical are Irish, it was one of the later changes we made in rewrites actually as it wasn't representative of the actual time.

C: A lot of the stuff recorded today was the big, heavy, emotional stuff, but there are obviously some lighter moments. A lot of people were saying to me, "Where's the lighter stuff?" The 'Master of the House', you know? Well, it wasn't a very funny time! There are moments of light relief where we have a bit of fun with the clash between the Irish and the Welsh, the banter and competition...and the miners and the ironworkers.

It is very much one of those big, melodramatic productions though isn't it?

C: It's a drama. I mean, does Schindler's List have a funny moment? If you're coming to see it, you're coming to go, "Wow."

J: I totally agree. I'm an advocate of going to the theatre to have your feelings changed and your opinions tested; I think if a piece of theatre can do that, whether you hated it or loved it, as long as it made you feel something then it did its job. 'My Land's Shore' will absolutely do that and I think people will love it.

C: It's an unashamedly big show and not a lot of people want to take a risk on new

shows nowadays. Money is thrown at little things that might have a future and things like jukebox musicals, which are great, they work for a particular audience, but I think there's an audience who wants to see a new wave of big, old-fashioned spectacle shows! It's the same reason you go to the cinema instead of waiting for the DVD.

We've written school versions with just six actors in it, acting musician versions that can be done with just twelve...but in a way I think, "Why should we do that?"

J: What's cool about that is, whatever format you put it in, the story is that powerful and it works.

C: We want it to really hit home and make people notice. I know people would sit and enjoy it – I would enjoy it! That's why we wrote it.



With all the jukebox and film-adapted musicals in the West End, is an original and powerful show like this something that's needed, in your opinion?

C: Absolutely! It's amazing how many people don't know about it and that's only because they haven't been told.

J: 'Dic Penderyn' is a martyr, not just in Wales but all over the United Kingdom. He's revered by working men from all four corners of the country. His story needs to be told.

C: Historically, it was the first time the red flag was ever flown as a symbol of revolution and it's a shame that we can't do that in our show (looks over at Jon).

J: (laughs) I can't imagine why that is!

C: We have managed to get a red flag in in a clever way; we don't ever fly it but we do get it in there. We have to! It's historically accurate. They made it by dipping a sheet in sheep's blood and we're using it at the end when they rip it to shreds and tie it around arms and have it in belts so they're all wearing part of this flag.

The interesting thing about the story though is that they weren't innocent. They had clubs and things; they were ready for something to kick off! You can never know

exactly what went on, but people say, “Oh, they were massacred by the English!” when they weren’t. They were sick of being treated in a certain way and were ready to change it however that might be, but the sad thing was, they had sticks and the other side had guns.

And of course, Richard Lewis was hanged. Years later though, in America, a guy on his deathbed (Ewan Parker) admitted being the guy who stabbed a soldier in the riots, which was the crime Richard Lewis was hanged for. What we’ve done in our story is to make one of the characters called Dafydd leave for America with another character (Cliona) to escape from what’s happening – he stabs one of the soldiers in the leg – and in my opinion, he changes his name and is the Ewan Parker in America.

With the show, was it pretty much artistic licence with the historic events or did you try to stay on track?

C: I think it’s difficult isn’t it, because you can read hundreds of articles from the time and they’ll all be slightly different. His last words for instance; you read one website and then it’s different on another...

B: We do stick to the main facts, but there is a certain amount of artistic licence because, although you want the history to be there, people don’t want to go to the theatre for two and a half hours of a history lesson! They want more, so we do have to have a love story at the core of it, well, more than one love story – it’s kind of a love triangle.

So what’s the general overview of the musical and its main characters?

C: We’ve got our reluctant hero which is Richard Lewis, i.e. ‘Dic Penderyn’, played by Jonathan Williams here. We also have Lewis Lewis, who is no relation to Richard Lewis. It’s about the two of them and their struggle against oppression. We’ve also got our tragic heroines who lose their men to the fight.

B: Lewis Lewis is very much a revolutionary right from the start, he’s there stirring people up; he sings ‘Make Wales Proud’ which you heard earlier. Richard Lewis is very concerned with what is going on around him but doesn’t believe in revolution, but certain things happen which make him realise that they have to do something and that it’s the only way. Then you have the third main character, Richard’s friend Dafydd, who isn’t in favour of revolution, he just gets dragged into it. Dafydd is in love with a young Irish widow, Cliona, but she is secretly in love with Richard, who’s married, and his wife Angharad is pregnant with his child, although he doesn’t know! We also have our Jenkins character who is the High Sheriff of Glamorgan –

J: Lovely songs that guy’s got...

C: Do you know what Jon said to me? He said “Okay, get David Thaxton in to do Jenkins, but he’s probably the only one who I’d step aside for and he could play Richard and I’d play Jenkins instead.”

J: Only if it was a solution, I wouldn’t really want that!

C: It’s not a solution. He will be a great Jenkins though; I hope he comes on board.

You mentioned David Thaxton there; do you have most of the characters covered or are there still people you’re hoping to bring in? I hear you’ve been talking to Killian Donnelly?

C: Yep, well we’ve got him now, essentially. He’s said yes, he’s up for it, as one of the Irish characters.

I’ll tell you someone we are trying to get for it; Michael Sheen, for the narration. He’s very patriotic and often does things that don’t make the paper. He’d be fantastic as narrator so we’re chasing that one down.

(Sean from Interfusion Films)

S: You’ll have to get the show on by 2031 for the (Merthyr Uprising) anniversary!

J: I think I’ll have to play Jenkins then. Dic Pendryrn was only 23 when he died! I said to Shaun earlier that being ten years older, the only way I could play him was because he’d been down the mines! He started work when he was fifteen – I didn’t – and was already a man ten years previous to me, so there you go, that’s how we figure it.

S: Is there any truth in the rumour that to get the ensemble in the right frame of mind, you set the London riots up this week?

C: I can neither confirm nor deny! No, to get them on board I just offered them a free lunch. To get actors, offer them lunch!

J: You didn’t offer me anything.

So what exactly are the plans for ‘My Land’s Shore’? You’re doing this demo recording and hoping to record a full album next year right?

C: The original plan was to get a studio like this for five days in a row where we could get all of the cast together, rehearse it as though we were going to put the show on, and record it live as we go, to get a really good, gritty feel to it. The original funding for this has fallen through though, so now Bob and myself are footing the bill for the demo recording which we’ll then put out and see if we can get some funding.

We're fortunate and unfortunate that our cast are all leading West End stars because trying to get our cast all together is logistically unfeasible at the moment, so I think we'll have a big day here, a big day there – we send it all to Andrew, who was recording for us today. He's been on board from day one recording-wise, and he is fantastic; he will magic anything we send and make it all fit to sound like one nice, clean, recording.

B: What we need is so many people buzzing about it that some producer comes along and says, “What’s this then?”

C: It's not like we've put this out overnight; we've worked at it, we feel like it's ready to go in front of a public.

J: I know it is. I'm so proud to be a part of it.

C: We're proud to have you mate. See, if Jon hasn't left yet, then we're alright.

As an advocate of new writing, it was wonderful to spend a day in the studio with ‘My Land’s Shore’ when it’s still at such an early stage. On the drive back, I couldn’t stop thinking about the story of ‘Dic Penderyn’ and found myself still humming the music once I was home. I can easily picture a completed production on a West End stage somewhere, with a full cast and live orchestra and it would be a sight to behold.

‘My Land’s Shore’ has all the ingredients a successful show needs: a powerful story, stunning music and a superb cast. They’re all there, mixed into a glorious musical blend and just waiting to be baked to golden-brown perfection; it just needs someone to come along and light the oven.

This could be the show that breaks through the proverbial glass ceiling that so many new productions have ground to a halt against. As one of the most original and exciting new musicals seen in a long time, ‘My Land’s Shore’ is ‘sure’ to ‘land’ itself a place in the West End one day, very soon hopefully.

Article by Julie Robinson

You can follow ‘My Land’s Shore’ on Twitter (@MyLandsShore) and their Facebook page.

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