

A Time for Singing

Richard Llewellyn's 1939 novel, *How Green Was My Valley*, was a popular success, so much so that Twentieth Century-Fox purchased the screen rights immediately and released their Academy Award-winning film version just two years later. The film itself is very musical, with its beautiful score by Alfred Newman, and a lot of townspeople singing a lot of tunes. So, it must have seemed a natural for such a musical property to be turned into an actual musical, and in 1966 that's exactly what happened with the aptly retitled *A Time for Singing* (today the show would be called *How Green Was My Valley – The Musical*).

The team responsible for musicalizing *How Green Was My Valley* was first-time Broadway composer John Morris, and first-time book and lyric writers Gerald Freedman and Morris. Morris had been kicking around Broadway for some years by then, providing dance arrangements for such shows as *Pipe Dream*, *Bells Are Ringing*, *Bye Bye Birdie*, *Wildcat*, *All American* and *Baker Street* to name a few. Freedman had also been kicking around, as an assistant director to the legendary Jerome Robbins on *West Side Story* and then *Gypsy*, after which he made his Broadway musical theater debut as director with *The Gay Life*. On board as producer was Alexander H. Cohen.

For their adaptation, Freedman and Morris had the show take place in the memory of David Griffith, a minister in a Welsh mining town. That was a change from the book and film, where the narrator was the adult version of the character Huy (played in the film by Roddy McDowell), who recounted the stories of his family and town. Like novel and film, the central conflict of the musical is over the formation of a miners' union, especially as reflected within the Morgan family. Then there's the blossoming romance between Morgan daughter Angharad and the minister. And then there were all the townspeople, too, so it was a large cast show with a lot of characters to keep track of.

An impressive cast was assembled, including Shani Wallis, Laurence Naismith, Tessie O'Shea, and Ivor Emmanuel. The choreographer was Donald McKayle, and the sets were by the great Ming Cho Lee, lighting by Jean Rosenthal, and costumes by Theoni V. Aldredge. Orchestrations were by Don Walker and the musical direction by Jay Blackton – in other words, a Class A cast and creative team straight down the line.

The show went into rehearsal, then a month later began its out-of-town tryout. It was clear from the beginning that the score was glorious but that the book was somewhat problematic. Because the show's co-book writer was also the show's director, he was apparently not keen to change much, even though the show had received middling reviews. At some point, Gower Champion arrived and offered to do some work on the show, but his suggestions were, for the most part, not taken – he did a little work on some of the dances, but it wasn't major and it wasn't enough to help the show's problems. It also didn't help that another show was trying out at the same time and had absolutely incredible buzz – a little show called *Mame*.

A Time for Singing finally opened on Broadway on May 21, 1966 after ten previews. The show once again received middling reviews, although several of them praised the music. Three days later, *Mame* opened and Broadway had its big, brassy, brand new hit. In an attempt to drum up interest, Miss Wallis appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, singing her beautiful ballad, "Let Me Love You," but it didn't help, and *A Time for Singing* closed quietly after only forty-one performances.

In retrospect, *A Time for Singing* was probably ahead of its time. Its story had very grim and very dramatic elements. Ken Mandelbaum, in his book *Not Since Carrie*, said that the show pointed the way to later musicals like *Les Miserables* and *Grand Hotel*, both in staging and music, which he thought was "richer and more serious" than other musicals of that era, and that it had a cinematic quality that would become popular in the 1970s and 1980s. And actually, just five months after *A Time for Singing* closed, *Cabaret* would usher in a new era for musicals – one that allowed for darker themes, and one that definitely led the way to the groundbreaking Sondheim/Prince musicals that began in 1970.

Over the years, a cult has grown for *A Time for Singing*, thanks to its excellent cast recording that was issued by Warner Bros. Records. The score is beloved by hordes of theater music fans and the album was always a sought-after collector's item. It has taken a long time to bring it to CD, and we're thrilled to be the ones to do it. And amazingly, for a show that closed after only forty-one performances, it's now being licensed for productions by the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization. Perhaps the show will be rediscovered – certainly the score is

worthy of rediscovery, with John Morris's lush and beautiful music, and excellent lyrics by Morris and Freedman.

For this first-ever CD release, the original album masters were used – they were in pristine condition and the sound was absolutely stunning. So, here, finally, is *A Time for Singing* and it is indeed truly a time for singing.

SHANI WALLIS REMEMBERS A TIME FOR SINGING

For Miss Wallis, who'd become a sensation in England at the tender age of seventeen when she'd appeared in *Call Me Madam*, *A Time for Singing* would be her first role in a musical in the United States. While starring in *Irma La Douce* in London, she was seen by the owner of the Persian Room in New York. "He asked if I had an act I could bring over," Miss Wallis remembers. "I didn't, but I said I did and then proceeded to put one together." She did the act to great acclaim but "For whatever reasons, I could not break into musicals here." So, she went on to do *The Garry Moore Show* and other TV work, and also appeared with Liberace, as well.

And then came *A Time for Singing*. Happily, the authors wanted her and wanted her so much that they actually auditioned the show for her. "I loved working with Ivor Emmanuel and Laurence Naismith and Tessie O'Shea, and the whole cast was just wonderful. But I must tell you that John and Gerry really pushed us, especially Ivor and me, to our vocal limits in terms of the singing." When the critics pronounced judgment on the show, Wallis remembers, "I was devastated by the reviews – I cried for three days." But it wouldn't take long to nurse her wounds because producer Mike Frankovich had seen her on *The Ed Sullivan Show* singing "Let Me Love You," and had been captivated by her. "He called and said he might have a little something for me." She flew to Hollywood and the "little something" turned out to be the movie version of Lionel Bart's smash hit stage show, *Oliver!* The rest, of course, is history.

Looking back on the show and her experiences, she says, "I have to say it has some of the greatest music ever written for a musical and I just loved doing the show."

— Bruce Kimmel