

ROCKA(GOOD)BYE HAMLET

A DISCUSSION OF THE FLOP ROCK MUSICAL ROCKABYE HAMLET

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Not much needs to be explained when it comes to playwright William Shakespeare and the impact he left on popular culture and arts throughout the world. His works have inspired great musical adaptations that run the gamut from Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* (inspired by *Romeo and Juliet*) to Joe DiPietro's Elvis Presley jukebox musical *All Shook Up* (inspired by *Twelfth Night*).¹ While these shows are highly acclaimed and have stood the test of time when it comes to their quality and quantity of revivals, there are others that did not make it as far. The most famous (or infamous, if you will) is Cliff Jones' and Gower Champion's 1976 musical *Rockabye Hamlet*.² The production was so abysmal that it ran for a mere seven days.³

¹ Logan Culwell-Block, "12 Musicals on Broadway and Beyond That Came From Shakespeare Plays," *Playbill*, last modified April 23, 2021, <https://www.playbill.com/article/12-musicals-on-broadway-and-beyond-that-came-from-shakespeare-plays>.

² Culwell-Block, "12 Musicals," *Playbill*.

³ The New York Times, "'Rockabye Hamlet' Closes," *New York Times* (1923-) (New York, N.Y.), 1976 Feb 23, [Page 1], <https://www-proquest-com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/historical-newspapers/rockabye-hamlet-closes/docview/123003381/se-2?accountid=14816>.

It is not necessarily uncommon for a show to have such a short-lived run, but it is the extremely opinionated reviews, odd subject matter, and previous success of the creators that made *Rockabye Hamlet*'s absolute failure such a shock during February of 1976. Rock musicals were gaining major popularity during the musical's debut, making its negative reception even more interesting. It leads one to wonder what exactly it was about *Rockabye Hamlet* that made people have such strong feelings at the time. Perhaps it was the casting, the music choices, the fact that it adhered too much to the source material or didn't adhere enough? It is more likely than not an amalgamation of all of these things; after all, *something* has to be rotten in the state of Denmark.

Rockabye Hamlet was created by Cliff Jones and Gower Champion, opening on Broadway in February of 1976 at the Minskoff Theater.⁴ Before making its way to New York, the Hamlet-adapted musical was originally a radio program and concept album produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. It was then done as a stage version at the Charlottetown Festival on Prince Edward Island.⁵ While not much can be found regarding the show's reception during its Canadian career, the musical must have been successful enough and had enough merit to advance to Broadway.

⁴ Clive Barnes, "Play: 'Rockabye Hamlet': New Musical Opens at Minskoff Theater the Cast," *New York Times* (1923-) (New York, N.Y.), 1976 Feb 18, <https://www-proquest-com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/historical-newspapers/play-rockabye-hamlet/docview/122708659/se-2?accountid=14816>.

⁵ Atlanta Constitution, "Rock Version of 'Hamlet' Closes after Brief Run," *The Atlanta Constitution* (1946-1984) (Atlanta, Ga.), 1976 Feb 24, <https://www-proquest-com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/historical-newspapers/rock-version-hamlet-closes-after-brief-run/docview/1617450530/se-2?accountid=14816>.

Before embarking on the harrowing journey of learning all about *Rockabye Hamlet*'s demise, the history and rise of the rock musical must be discussed. What exactly is a rock musical? How did they start? Where did they come from? These are important questions to answer when putting into context how the musical's "disturbingly banal...[and] vulgar" style came to be.⁶

As rock and roll music became increasingly more prevalent on the radio and in the media, artists from all other mediums, particularly those of the stage and screen, felt like it was time for them to shift into the new style as well. However, the musical theatre world did not take too keenly to the "rock-and-roll revolution," as they saw the rock genre as a "noisy, vulgar fad."⁷ The 1967 musical *Hair* composed by Galt Macdermot was the first hit (and most memorable) rock musical; ironically enough, ruthless musical reviewer Clive Barnes claimed that "rock music was the sole hope for Broadway musicals" upon seeing *Hair*.⁸ Other rock musical successes also came to fruition in the 60s and 70s, such as Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar* and Stephen Schwartz's *Godspell*. Macdermot ended up composing another rock musical in 1971, this time based on Shakespeare's work, called *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.⁹ The show won the Tony for best musical that year, therefore proving that Shakespearean content could assimilate well into pop culture; it seems as if

⁶ Barnes, "Rockabye Hamlet."

⁷ Elizabeth L. Wollman, *The Theater Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical, from Hair to Hedwig* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), [1].

⁸ John Kenrick, "Stage 1970s, Part I: Rock Musicals," Musicals 101.com, last modified 2014, accessed September 15, 2021, <http://www.musicals101.com/1970bway1.htm>.

⁹ Kenrick, "Stage 1970s," Musicals 101.com.

Rockabye Hamlet simply never met this mark, despite its creation during the heyday of the rock musical.

Another shocker regarding *Rockabye Hamlet*'s dismal reception was the fact that its director, Gower Champion, was already a major figure in the world of theatre. Champion won Tony awards for his work on *Bye Bye Birdie* (1960), and he directed the film adaptation of *Hello, Dolly!* (1964) which is still a highly acclaimed and legendary film today.¹⁰ It can be confidently stated that Champion was not green when it came to cultivating a success, which makes the shoddy Shakespearian show even more of an enigma to the critical eye.

Rockabye Hamlet opened at the Minskoff Theater in February of 1976 with theoretically bright prospects after its success in Canada; that optimism could not be any more incorrect. Two of the most notable reviews post-show were those of Clive Barnes and Edwin Wilson; neither man had anything glowing to say.

Clive Barnes was an English writer and critic for *The New York Times* from 1965 to 1977. He was a man of considerable power at the time and had great influence on the success of a Broadway production.¹¹ Barnes opened up his review by calling *Rockabye Hamlet* a "disturbingly banal mixture of the flashy and the vulgar."¹² This statement alone is enough to leave one rather taken aback, but this is only scratching the

¹⁰ George Dorris, "The Career of Gower Champion," *Dance Chronicle* 23, no. 1 (2000): [Page 78], <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1568015>.

¹¹ William Grimes, "Clive Barnes, Who Raised Stakes in Dance and Theater Criticism, Dies at 81," *The New York Times*, last modified November 19, 2008, accessed October 5, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/20/arts/dance/20barnes.html>.

¹² Barnes, "Rockabye Hamlet." [The quotations in the discussion that follow stem from this initial review].

surface for Barnes. He goes on to critique pop culture's over adaptation of *Hamlet*, questioning "has that gentle ghost not suffered enough?" The central idea behind Barnes' review and his principle complaint is that the musical ultimately "failed because trying to improve on Shakespeare in the theater is a kind of self-destructive arrogance at best." In all honesty, this claim has some validity, although it may be wrong in its execution. As Shakespeare is and most likely forever will be an absolute icon when it comes to the theatre, it is hard to replicate or reimagine his works without coming off as a little tacky, or even conceited -- as if someone thinks that they can better rework the Bard's works than the Bard himself. This being said, however, Barnes did not need to be so hostile.

Aside from the general idea that reworkings of *Hamlet* should be put to bed, Clive Barnes had a field day when it came to curating composer Cliff Jones' mistakes. Barnes saw Jones' compositions as a "middle-aged apology for the real [rock music]" and even calls him a "second-rate musician with a third-rate mind." Not only does Barnes insult the show, but he absolutely destroyed Jones' career with this one statement. In contrast to Gower Champion, whose name, Barnes notes, is more prominent on the Playbill for a reason, Cliff Jones' had not yet made it big in the Broadway business; Clive Barnes' review ensured he would never make it big like he hoped.

The review concludes with a rare moment of subtle praise towards the beautiful staging and innovative use of ramps to simulate a rock concert style. Barnes' final statement remarks on the audience's reaction to the show, where he says that "the audience seemed to like the show. But perhaps they wouldn't have liked *Hamlet*, and not many of them looked young enough

to appreciate rock.”¹³ Despite the fact that musicals are supposed to entertain the common folk, Barnes thinks that they don’t matter -- his voice is the only one that deserves to be heard. Even if the audience possibly wouldn’t enjoy the original source material, is it not enough that they’re engaging with it in some way? If we want Shakespeare to maintain its relevance, perhaps shoddy rock musicals are occasionally the only way this can be done and attract certain audiences.

Edwin Wilson, a theater critic for *The Wall Street Journal* from 1972 to 1994 (as well as a Vanderbilt University alum) also had very strong opinions on the failed rock musical; however, he was not as cutthroat as Barnes in his language and discussion of the show.¹⁴ Similar to Barnes’ thoughts on giving odd revivals of *Hamlet* a rest, Wilson remarked that the musical carries itself as a “curious phenomenon of mockery...to assimilate material from other forms is one thing; to let yourself be taken over by them is something else...[you become] guilty of overkill.”¹⁵ There is, once again, truth to this statement. With a flashy (and at the time relatively new) rock-style musical based off of subject matter as academically revered and sacred as *Hamlet*, one is bound to turn heads in a negative way if the homage isn’t properly executed.

Wilson suggests that *Rockabye Hamlet* should take some notes from the 1971 rock musical *Godspell*, where rock music

¹³ Barnes, "Rockabye Hamlet."

¹⁴ "Edwin Wilson," Edwin Wilson, accessed October 7, 2021, <http://edwinwilsonwrites.com/>.

¹⁵ Edwin Wilson, "Alas, Poor Yorick and Hamlet, Too," *Wall Street Journal*, 1976 Feb 19, <https://www-proquest-com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/historical-newspapers/alas-poor-yorick-hamlet-too/docview/134153227/se-2?accountid=14816>.

was tastefully used in a direct and simple manner.¹⁶ It was loosely based on biblical tales, but it didn't attempt to overly replicate them. This is also the case for Andrew Lloyd Webber's sensational 1976 musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which used bible stories as its base and was a rock musical. It wasn't overly flashy to the point where it felt like a mockery and still was genuine and intentional in its display.

Like Barnes, Wilson also commends Champion and some of the actors for their efforts to repair the musical mess created by Jones.¹⁷ Wilson states that Champion has "arranged [the show] with energy and a keen pictorial sense," which is quite a contrast from his cacophonous descriptions of Jones' compositions.¹⁸ The acting performance that stands out the most to Wilson is that of Beverly D'Angelo, who played Ophelia; she infuses her performance with a sense of "restlessness and a sense of futility that is extremely powerful."¹⁹

In terms of concrete facts regarding *Rockabye Hamlet*, there's very little documentation. Thanks to the reviews by Barnes and Wilson, it's known that there was no dialogue in the show, only singing.²⁰ Additionally, the set was rather minimal with the exception of the drawbridge/center ramp that was well utilized. According to Wilson, the "Moog Synthesizer [onstage is a]...reminder that the show is a product of the space age."²¹ With this kind of statement being made, it's clear that the musical did not adhere to the original style of *Hamlet* at all.

¹⁶ Edwin Wilson, "Alas, Poor Yorick."

¹⁷ Edwin Wilson, "Alas, Poor Yorick."

¹⁸ Edwin Wilson, "Alas, Poor Yorick."

¹⁹ Edwin Wilson, "Alas, Poor Yorick."

²⁰ Edwin Wilson, "Alas, Poor Yorick."

²¹ Edwin Wilson, "Alas, Poor Yorick."

For example, the song “All My Life” is a solo rock ballad in the show, but its lyrics are repetitive and do not relate to the original text from *Hamlet* in at all.²² The same goes for the song “All By Yourself”; there is no development for the show through the songs or the lyrics. The lyrics are just the title repeated over and over again with a typical rock beat in the back; it’s not very dynamic, nor is it exciting.²³ The costumes were even fairly modern and paid homage to the Renaissance era (corsets, boots, peasant blouses) but with 70s styles like vests, sequins, and knee high boots also prominent.²⁴

Even deaths were done differently in this modern adaptation; for example, Ophelia’s death is caused by strangling herself with a microphone cord after her major song in the show.²⁵ These bold directorial choices, in the opinions of reviews and perhaps patrons alike, are what caused *Rockabye Hamlet* to be seen as a camp, disrespectful rendition of a highly regarded piece of work.

While these two extremely blunt reviews encapsulate the general opinions of *Rockabye Hamlet* in the arts’ world and sealed its fate on Broadway in regards to its failure, Cliff Jones, the infamous creator himself, had his own choice words to say as to why the show did not go as well as he had hoped. In an article written for *The Globe and Mail* in 1976 by Martin Rubert, Jones candidly expresses his feelings.

²² Rory Dodd - *All My Life* (*Rockabye Hamlet*, 1976), performed by Rory Dodd, 1976.

²³ Rory Dodd - *All By Yourself* (*Rockabye Hamlet*, 1976), performed by Rory Dodd, 1976.

²⁴ Logan Culwell-Block, "12 Musicals on Broadway and Beyond That Came From Shakespeare Plays."

²⁵ Edwin Wilson, "Alas, Poor Yorick."

Jones claims that he was “personally attacked by the dean of the New York critics, Clive Barnes”²⁶ which is the interviewer previously referenced. Jones wanted to sue Barnes for libel, but there weren’t any legitimate grounds. He believes that the main reasons for the show’s failure were the critics, upon which he remarked, “what we got hit for was that we were trying to do something different with Hamlet. It’s some sort of a sacred object down there. All the reviews started with the same premise. ‘Why Hamlet?’ The reason I’m so opposed to [the critics] is that they try to mold what’s going on.”²⁷ Essentially, Jones recognizes that a lot of his show’s fate played into the hands of the kings of Broadway, people whom he had no control over and virtually no connections to, as he was not from America. It seems as if he possibly relied on Champion to carry him to the forefront.

The other biggest issue, according to Jones, was funding. The show was completely out of money and was dependent on what critics had to say.²⁸ Thanks to men like Barnes and Wilson, there were no ticket sales to keep the show afloat. On top of this issue, the show did not have a long preview period, meaning that the producers didn’t have a safety net period of time where they could iron out any kinks that weren’t well received. If the musical had “three months of previews...the word of mouth and some good advertising would have been

²⁶ Martin Rubert, "Jones Bloodied by Broadway, but Unbowed," *The Globe and Mail* (1936-) (Toronto, Ont.), 1976 Feb 26, <https://www-proquest-com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/historical-newspapers/jones-bloodied-broadway-unbowed/docview/1239860817/se-2?accountid=14816>.

²⁷ Rubert, "Jones Bloodied."

²⁸ Rubert, "Jones Bloodied."

good enough that the critics couldn't have hurt" *Rockabye Hamlet*.²⁹

In short, Cliff Jones doesn't see his production as a failure in regards to its content like the reviewers did. Instead, Jones attributes the show's failure to its lack of funding and attention paid to it by the rest of the theatrical industry. He sees nothing wrong with the attempt to revamp a work of Shakespeare yet again; Jones' biggest demand for his next project is that he maintains total production control, and he states he will avoid the Broadway circuit.³⁰ This method, in his opinion, will help his future productions become successes.

All of this said, why was *Rockabye Hamlet* such an erratic failure in its Broadway debut? It seems like it depends on who you ask. To the bigwigs of the Broadway industry, *Rockabye Hamlet* was too much of a parody to be a respected work. With its flashy lights, directorial choices, and cacophonous music, it was not of the caliber of the other rock musicals at the time. Additionally, it essentially paid no homage to *Hamlet* with its musical style or style of speaking, which would deter even the most avid fans of the Bard's work. However, creators see the opposite side, believing that the show's success was at the mercy of an industry that has no room for anything remotely experimental. These discrepancies occurred almost 50 years ago, and rock musicals have come into greater fashion since then; perhaps it's time to give the infamous *Rockabye Hamlet* another chance in the Minskoff Theater.

²⁹ Rubert, "Jones Bloodied."

³⁰ Rubert, "Jones Bloodied."

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