

DOUGLAS HODGE 101 DALMATIANS INTERVIEW

PODCAST TRANSCRIPTION

Welcome to the Regent's Park Open Air Theatre podcast. In this episode, we invited Edward Seckerson to talk to *101 Dalmatians* music and lyrics composer Douglas Hodge, about the development of his new musical score and inspiration behind the pieces. Stay tuned to find out more about this brand-new musical adaptation set in Regent's Park this summer.

Now, let's hand over to Douglas for our latest episode...

INTRO PIANO MUSIC, *BEAUTIFUL DAY/NOW THEN*

Get out of the Tube!
Get into the air!
Loosen that choke chain that's keeping you there
Elbow your way to a world elsewhere
We can't waste this beautiful –
Even if it's raining
Beautiful
Won't hear us complaining
Beautiful day –
It's closing in this world we're in –
Kicking down the door
How I'm ever gonna find the one that I've been waiting for?
Regent's Park, the Queen's own park, the Royal Park serene
Get out of the grey, get into the blue
And onto somewhere green

And breathe... (pant) huh huh huh huh huh huh

MUSIC FADES

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

Douglas, it's been quite serendipitous in a way that – that you appeared in the very first musical ever to be commissioned specifically for Regent's Park Open Air Theatre -

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

That's true -

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

Back in 1983, something called Bashville.

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Yes, yes -

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

And here you are as composer, lyricist on only the second musical that they've ever commissioned.

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Yes it's quite remarkable I think. It's funny how life works and we always say that but – yes because really I think I'd never been in a musical. Bashville was – I was 23 years old, I think it was my third job out of RADA and I was given the eponymous role – and I had no idea how to do anything but it was a big success and it went on a following year and did it again. So yes it was the only – it was a George Bernard Shaw play about boxing that Dennis Keene in the end, set to music and I – the thing I remember most is going to Abbey Road to record the final album of the – yeah

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

I don't know the – I didn't see it, I'll be honest. I see most things but I didn't see that -

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

No

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

and it was up for an Olivier as well -

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Yes it was, yes

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

Blood Brothers took it that year

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Well yeah Blood Brothers -

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

Go figure – so I mean the wonder is in a way that *101 Dalmatians* has never been done before as a musical because, you know certainly for Regent's Park it's the location for the piece, for Dodie Smith's book anyway but I mean it's been a long time, there have been so many adaptations but I thought someone would have got to it as a musical -

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Well it has actually, there was one other version. Well I think there's been several - Well the interesting story about that is that Dodie Smith rather credibly indomitably wouldn't give to Disney the stage rights.

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

Ah

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

And Disney of course are used to hoovering up all rights to your entire life, and couldn't get the stage rights from her. And then, made the live action versions which they made enormous amounts of money but she would never relinquish the stage rights. And I think there'd been some other versions since then.

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

Looking through your rehearsal script and listening to your own demos, some of which will feature exclusively in this podcast – give people a flavour of you – but what impressed me really was your book writer Johnny McKnight and your good self, how you've managed to bring it into the here and now with key issues like animal welfare and the fur trade and being referenced and of course the fact that Cruella De Vil just has to be an influencer doesn't she – I mean – that's the social media thing, aspect of it –

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Yes it's been a – I mean we have to say, we need to mention Zinnie Harris there too. Also my big thing was that it must be a family show, that we can't have a political piece that's sort of banging on it's drum about whatever it is, it has to be that eight year olds learn the songs and then maybe even get given a tale and come up on stage at the end and become their own puppies and we'll have them all, you know, it doesn't matter.

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

Well that's a fine line to tread, trying to create a sophisticated piece that adults would appreciate and kids.

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Yeah - which is always great, but I think Johnny's brought this, sort of overall wholesome hilarity to it.

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

I mean there's a wonderful verbal dexterity to your writing and, you know actors way with words I think, the rhythm of the words it gives the piece great energy but also, I just wondered whether it's the words that dictate the music to you, or how do you write?

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Yeah I think it probably is lyric led, my - the things I've learnt being an actor in musicals is that you have to start a song somewhere and finish somewhere else and then each song does have a plot, in a musical, not in the charts, but that you have to begin somewhere and you have to be changed by the end of it. Now of course if you're writing a big family piece that you want children to listen to, to there are times where that can be really very simple, Knick knack paddy whack lyrics you know, but that has to happen, and there has to be story and narrative in the song, which means I think that they tend to be lyric led. I also want it to be funny and I think they need a little bit of time after to landed, to be understood, to be laughed at, and then you move on and so you have to sort of place things in that way, so that definitely has influenced perhaps you know the melodic structure I suppose, certainly the rhythmic structure – but I

suppose also in certain positions in the musical, I've always had ideas about what I feel the feel of the song would be. You know whether that would be a simply ballad or a patter song, or whether it would be a huge rock song, or whatever it is, that that moment would so those two things have had to marry and sometimes I have had I suppose themes in my head, but generally I - all the songs I've ever written, I've started with a premise really, so I'll have a sort of premise in my mind. Like the moon is only three days away, that's a premise right and then you think that's a kind of lovely idea, you know, and it could mean, I can fall in love quickly, it could mean I can do whatever I want, you know it can mean any amount of things, and I know that the moon is only three days away, has a certain melodic idea inside it, and I can tell already what speed that song is, and that from that, I suppose, I would work on the music and the lyrics hopefully fall into place.

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

And of course where you, in musicals, where you place the songs is so critical, in a book, song musical, it doesn't arise, it is through composed, which is why I kind of prefer the book song format. You know, Stephen Sondheim always wanted to work with a book writer because he liked the collaborative aspect of it. Do you feel that way, or could you work the other way as well?

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

I've never - I've written three musicals in my life and this is the first about to be performed to the public, the others have been endless development. So the other two I've written before this, so I have spent years doing workshops and working on those musicals and they've yet to see the light of day. I mean that's sort of the nature of musicals, it can take ten years for them to happen.

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

I mean do you enjoy the process? It sounds like it comes very easily to you.

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Oh completely, I enjoy the process. I did - for answering your question, when I first thought about the first musical that I wrote I literally in my shed put up every musical and then I had columns really of the orders of the songs and it became very clear to me that each song had a function and a job to do and each song - and incredibly they fell into you know, you could say ok song one is always establishing the community of the ensemble, song two is generally the needs or wants of the main protagonist, song three is often a comic, second character relief thing, song four the ensemble come back. And you would find if you looked at Company, if you looked at, you know, Oh! What a Lovely War, you know if you looked at West Side Story, a huge broad cabaret, Oliver these things do fall into a certain pattern, so I suppose that at home I studied that, and felt that there is a real scientific structure to a way a piece should work. And I felt, there is a real beautiful science to reprises, that if a father sings this song, it's lovely if the puppy sings that - has a motorical melody, in it's head. and I think what's probably has happened is we've developed the story to who it's for exactly, that's occasionally thrown me - incredible - you know, oh I see, that doesn't fit with my lovely structure, suddenly we're going - you want to go back to the park and have all the dogs in and I'm just about to write my little love song. So that has changed and is still evolving.

We're in the middle of rehearsals, week 2 of rehearsals, week 3 starting on Monday, so that's literally evolving as we speak.

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

There's an old showbiz maxim that warns against working with animals and children, I'm sure they'll add puppets at some point to this. Without giving too many spoilers, cos I want to talk about one or two specific numbers that have caught my ear in the show and how you arrived at them, but without giving too much away, you and Tim Sheader have obviously devised a way of presenting this piece on stage, you weren't auditioning singing dogs for example. How's it going to work? Or would you rather not say?

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

No, I think Tim's feeling was, I'd love to do *101 Dalmatians* it's just the most marvellous title, wonderful for Regent's Park because it's set in Regent's Park but until I know how to do the dogs, you can't even begin to commission something and so the dogs are puppets and as there is more and more of an understanding of puppetry in theatre, the *Life of Pi*, *War Horse*, and I went to a workshop, nearly all the workshops were simply about achieving the dogs so that, your heart breaks as soon as they come on, the hard thing is it's at Regent's Park Open Air Theatre where there is no darkness, no lighting. Not that it matters, not in the first half, so unusually for puppets, we don't have, so that again dictated – I think we would have perhaps made a few different decisions if we knew we'd be indoors and in the dark, but the idea that the puppets, and you see how they work, and that they are created in front of you, once that was solved, then we were sort of hell for leather, and I don't really care – I'm just writing songs for this is the dad dog and this is the mum dog and this is the runt of the litter, and this is the human and this is the dog, you know this is Cruella. I was just writing for the characters after that.

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

The birthing scene and the subsequence on litter bugs, starts out as a lullaby, very strangely touching but I think that scene, is something that young and old will relate to as the puppies arrive.

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Yeah hopefully, the sequence is, there are 15 puppies born throughout the first song, which will turn around 3 times. Then they are absolutely exhausted, very proud of themselves, everyone collapses. I mean there are elements of panto, there are elements of you know, you just want children to sing a very quick and difficult song, it was, that's how that came about, but then we had the idea that each verse as it gets faster and faster, the puppets grow, so the dogs grow. First the puppies are spotless just tiny little socks, whatever they are and then the next one they've got their spots, and then the next one we see how they're fully grown. So you know, with each verse, it gets faster and faster and life gets more chaotic, that they're everywhere now, not just snoring and farting, you know, chewing the furniture, it's complete chaos, and that's – and I suppose I always knew that the song, there's so much going on onstage, the song has to be repetitive and simple.

PIANO MUSIC PLAYS LITTERBUGS

Talk about a little litter
We've got a big litter
'Bout as big a litter as a litter can be
All the needs a little hug
A little bit of litter love
Makes a literal litterbug out of me

I got one,
You got three
Two are on that chair
Four behind door
Two on the floor
There's another three somewhere

PIANO INTERLUDE

Talk about a little litter
We got a big litter
Bout as big a litter as a litter can be
All they needs a little hug
A little bit of litter love
Makes a literal litterbug out of me

MUSIC FADES

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

I also love the idea that we're constantly switching between what the dogs are thinking and saying and what the humans are thinking and saying and that's – you can have a lot of fun with that, and you do -

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Yes

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

From what I've seen. There's another scene where Cruella offers the money for 15 grand to the husband and I think it's a really clever number heads or tails, where the human element of being tempted by that money. I can't remember in the original cartoon whether he was ever tempted by the money or whether that's something you guys have devised.

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

No honestly I haven't seen the cartoon for five years, I don't think it even comes up.

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

No

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

And the truth is I suppose, I said, I think you'd get at least a grand a puppy, I mean you would, if you or I had a dog, who had 15 puppies and they were Dalmatians, probably two thousand and it would probably solve a lot of their problems, so it is a real dilemma, because it's not in the book, but Cruella goes, I'll give you fifteen thousand, well who would say no to that?

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

Exactly and people will relate to that, it's a very human, that kind of, maybe this, maybe that, his mind is flipping all the way through the song.

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Yeah and we've sort of been developing that all week and now the ensemble have much more of a sort of, two devils on his shoulder, one is saying take the money, take the money, and the other's saying you can't sell these puppies, so it's a very sort of, Faustian number.

*** MUSIC PLAYS HEADS OR TAILS***

That's a lot of money!
That's a lot of money!
Danielle Darling – Go on a Spree!
You deserve a pampering – What's it to be?
No! Wait just a minute now! That's not me!
That's not her either truth be told
Danielle I've rejected the fif –
The fif – The fifteen thousand –
All told
Honestly love would you really be happier
With 15 puppies

AAAHHH

When you could have
More possessions – A Dyson, A Bicycle, even a Car!
Of course you wouldn't
You're the kind of person who knows who they are
Every pup to a home
Ker-Chinng!
Me and Dan more time alone
Ring a Ding
Work our fingers to the bone
Ding Ding
Do we want bubbas or do we want
Bling!

It's heads I do, tails I don't
15 tails say I won't
Go through with this
Has one of you poo'd in this?

School me, tell me

MUSIC FADES

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

Have you got, musical heroes Douglas, that have played into your love of music, and your desire to write it?

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Well I suppose I have – yeah I mean, many many many, from Paul Simon to Jerry Herman I mean, all sorts of – I mean incredible different genres really and all through my life at different phases, yeah. I don't have a specific

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

No

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

I mean I keep learning that, and more and more people are I think -

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

Cruella?

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

I mean she is iconic of course, and you know, the mother of all chewing scenery, yes villains and the reason books have quotes of Cruella around, you know, she's on the internet as Cruella lines and obviously she's going to get a big number and a kind of aria, and I think almost the wittiest thing was this number, "FÜR FUR" referring to the German of four. Fur. I think that's such a great idea and I just hope people get it – you know.

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

I don't suppose they will, but there's a thousand things, a hundred things in the musical that are hidden that perhaps, you might get on second hearing, or something -

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Well they've been told about it here so there you go *laughs* -

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

So I mean, you've got the wonderful Kate Fleetwood playing Cruella, I love Kate Fleetwood. So tell us about that number, because that's the kind of, the big, is it the Act 1 finale?

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Yes it is, yes I suppose initially when we first started writing, I assumed I think that something, with her backstory in, how she'd been left in the dog basket, she'd behave badly, how her father was always cold and it was very operatic *imitates the music sound* it was like, it had that sort of rhythm and then Tim, this is the way producers work, it's a very exact language so that, the producers were like, we need something a bit more, you know, Defying Gravity, we need something a bit more Ed Sheeran – and you think, that's really not helpful – we need her character with some – so anyway I think there was a feeling that she was getting more and more modern as the writers evolved her, and I'd started then to explore the idea that she was in the world of Cardi B. I don't know if you know Cardi B but Cardi B has a whole world of fascinating. So I started to write and listen extensively to all that kind of music and they're incredibly lyric based so if someone bites you, you'd better bit them back, and things like that were around that work, so it did sort of modernise, and then I just saw I need to write something where she expresses her, maybe snaps a puppy in the middle of it or something which I think isn't going to happen -

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

No *laughs*

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

It wouldn't be 100 puppies then. But you know -

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

Very upset children -

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Yes exactly – doors, the end of the show, not the end of the first half, but it had that sort of energy I think, so yes, and then I ended up with “Fur” which Kate absolutely nails, and is very moving to hear at the read through, we had a read through on Thursday, and now we have a sort of carmina burana ensemble underneath the whole thing you know which is great fun, and all these things they are quotes to a degree, because it is *101 Dalmatians*, it's Cruella and as you say scenery chewing, so yeah there's a sort of fantastic, couldn't be – it can't get too big really.

*** MUSIC PLAYS FÜR FÜR***

**O Yes there it is again
My only constant friend
The enmity the dislike
Something that quite naturally
Just by being me
I incite
I'm not fit for purpose when it comes to loving
Not right it seems for someone else to hold
I've got all I need, right here, I'm my own woman
And I'm not coming back from
Never coming in from**

The cold

**It's too late to change me now
I'm no simpering housefrau
I'm a satellite
All Alone
Not a thing do I regret
But this child who never wept
Is blood and bone**

**If the callouse world elects to find me wanting
Be careful when you pull this tiger's tale**

MUSIC FADES

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

You know, what's stage at are we at now and how is it going to be scored, I'm curious to know what size the band will be.

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Band 11

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

11, that's pretty, pretty big nowadays isn't it.

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Well it's a cast of about 30, big band, I think, you know the whole thing about it being outdoors and seeing them, band, and how you do the puppets led me to, I think, what Tim was, what I understood Tim was leaning towards was more a sort of poor theatre version, it's a – everything is – the car is suddenly constructed – she can grow in size and things like that the puppets can be incredible and so I felt that there was almost a sort of skiffle feel and home spun, you know, using the saw, using not banjos but clarinets and those sort of kind of, earthier instruments so there was a klezmer, kind of feels very, very home spun, not folk but – and then still having bits of madness in it, and bits of modern as I say, Cardi B, but nothing truly electronic and very sort of earth bound and organic, and Sir Travis is orchestrating it, and Sarah and I, started it and obviously there is obvious clarinets do this, you know, flutes do this, way of doing this, and I asked, we went to a studio for three days with a drummer, I was on piano, Sarah was, in the end I just sort of stood back and Sarah played piano, I had a drummer, guitar, bass and piano, and we played and I sang, maybe five songs, and each time I was going, as if I had formed a band and said ok, lets – this is a song I've written, how are we - this is what's in my mind, and then they'd say here we need to double up the drums, you know – so it sort of moved away from musical theatre and into something -

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

I got a lot of this from even listening to your demos, and I think it's such a refreshing change, everything is synth now, everything is electronic, everything is high tech and I think that that kind of home spun feel

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Yeah and it feels right for the open air too, I mean I think one of the great villains I'm learning in musical theatre is Syballius because it corrects grace notes, it corrects eccentricity, it measures things you that don't want to be measured and often I've, when I listen to the radio, I listen to these incredibly complex songs, Kendrick Lamar, whatever and then I listen to musical theatre and think, this is so simple, how is this so, do they not know that this music exists? And there are these two sorts of worlds and I think that sometimes, that whole Syballius process of, how you annotate music and how you put things down, does you know take some of that, kind of improvisational, more jazz feel out of it, and therefore it has a certain feel to it, and of course you need to do that because you are playing someone singing, and you're conducting and it has to be regulated but there is a sort of edge and a roughness that hopefully you can bring to something that just gives it, I don't know, an organic feel to it.

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

So it feels hands on – yeah. I mean I'm curious to know, I asked you about your influences but in musical theatre, have you got heroes, have you got shows that you love particularly, other than the ones you've done obviously.

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Well I do I suppose and I also yes, I think, I mean I like the more populist, I suppose it started with Olivier, Oliver and Godspell, were I think the first things I ever saw as a human and I remember going down on stage, in the interval of Godspell and seeing David Essex and thinking this is incredible, and more or less I've directed since then, without almost subliminally I've tried to invite the audience through glass of wine, at some point and there's an element of that in this definitely that I would love every child in the audience to get on stage and have a puppy tale and be one of the dalmatians and join in and who knows when the stage -

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

You may not be able to stop them, that's going to happen now.

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

I would love that for that to be the case, you know.

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

Yeah -

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

And I think Oliver is an astonishing musical, and an astonishing film of the musical, so I have always loved Fagen and all that kind of cleverness of that, you can feel Dickens would have liked it and

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

but again it's got that very, very, earthy spun quality to it, yes exactly, Bart was just a natural so of the other projects lined up, is there anything you are - that's developed to the point where you could actually –

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Yeah well I suppose, Covid has sort of put a blight on most things, the first musical really is called Meantime, and I was Associate Director at the Donmar for a while and one of my briefs was to develop new works and we were working around Chekhov at the time and I – I said, I would love to write a song for each character, just a little folk song for how they – and that developed and then, we had a workshop with these incredible actors which of course at the Donmar you can get the most extraordinary people and then Aschlin Ditta came in who was a sort of sketch and play and film writer, hadn't written much theatre, and had this fantastic sort of immediately set it in an airport, immediately updated it and that has grown and grown and we did a workshop at the Menier Chocolate Factory and there was talk about doing it at the Other Palace and all these things because when Covid came in it just sort of, put on hold but I would, it's a very different piece and very modern and very tech now because of the airport thing so it's a very different feel but it's -

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

But that's a good thing as well, there's so much generic around and I love it when people, you know, choose a musical language which fits like a glove -

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

The world, yeah. I think, in this world that's dictating a family show that children have got to love, it's dictating the music and Cruella is dictating that the size of the songs, no doubt about it and the children, you know, children are playing the puppies, so these tiny voices, I just weep every time they sing my songs, you know. Because it's just extraordinary - the Meantime musical is very adult and a love story and very tough so there's that and the other one is a musical called Wig Maker which had another genesis, completely different where I was making a short film, I'd made it, directed Bryony Lavery play last Easter about a woman dying from cancer and we interviewed a Wig Maker for the NHS whose wife was just bitter and all these people with such illness, coming and she didn't have resources and I was writing a short film about her, and then it sort of occurred to me that it would be rather incredibly to write a chorus line version of the people who came into her chair, so we did some verbatim interviews with people, some who were dying of cancer, some who were just the stars who needed something and I wrote a sort of, you know it just didn't seem the type of thing I would ever want to go and watch, so bleak and so awful and I was, Neal Marcus who had at that time called The Stable, he commissioned it, he heard of me, and in time commissioned that and I sort of said, this is too bleak, and then I married a Wig Maker. An entirely different – the project was already in my mind, and then her life was totally different, and in her workshop there are hundreds of heads they're all staring at her, and I just thought, well if you shut that door and all those heads came to life it would be delicious, so it turned into actually a sort of puppet fairy tale -

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

Fairy tale?

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

And I've written this huge sort of thing, elaborate thing, it's set in New York and it's really, you know, more about her really, it's appealing to her marvellous dexterity with making these extraordinary characters and it's become much more like 101 in a way, it's much more – and that was collected and scooped up and supported by James Dacre in Northampton and then again Covid and money and development and that sort of hanging in the air and now I'm doing this. But it was a gala that we had for the Wig Maker where I first, we played about five songs, I think that Tim and management at Regent's Park and Runaway came to see and then approached me and went how about *101 Dalmatians*. So I'm doing actually the last one I was commissioned to make, but hopefully those other two, I'd love them to see the light of day.

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

Yes – fantastic. I was going to say will you still be a dog lover at the end? *laughs*

[DOUGLAS HODGE]

Oh yes, I'll still be a puppy love.

[EDWARD SECKERSON]

That's great, thanks a lot Douglas, that's terrific.

MUSIC PLAYS ONE HUNDRED AND ONE

Whatever you think, there'll always be
Room for a heart to expand
Life is a tardis, life gets bigger,
Life's an elastic ban –
And
If you're feeding the 5000
There's plenty room for more
How d'you get two whales in a mini?
Straight down the old M4
Because one added extra?

-The more the merrier
Who u standing next ta?
Part of the plethora?
Two's company
Three's a crowd but four's a fiesta!

You give someone a brand new purse
Don't hand it over empty,
Put a little extra penny in – They'll have luck a plenty
If you lay the table and there's thirteen places there
Add one more make sure the invisible man has a chair

Because one added extra?
The more the merrier
Who you standing next ta?

There's no barrier
Part of the plethora?
Two's company
Three's a crowd but four's a fiesta

The more yeast you put in the bread
The more the bread will leaven
Add add add add add add is our only maths progression

MUSIC FADES

We hope you enjoyed our latest podcast episode. A big thank you to Douglas for that insight into the creative process behind making new musicals. Tickets for *101 Dalmatians* are now on sale via openairtheatre.com. Performances run from 12 July to 28 August 2022.

Also don't forget to subscribe to our podcast on Apple podcasts, Spotify, GooglePlay or Soundcloud and, if you're enjoying our content, do let us know on social media via @openairtheatre on twitter, @regentsparkcoat on Instagram or Regent's Park Open Air Theatre on Facebook. See you next time!