

Movie Musical Success: What Are the Key Factors?

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Have you ever wondered why one movie musical receives critical acclaim and maybe even an Academy Award and another movie based on an equally good Broadway musical ends up on a studio shelf, rarely seen after its initial release? There are several key factors that lead to a quality movie musical. These factors include a strong story line and well-written screenplay, quality music, great casting, and effective direction. Great choreography is often a plus but a movie musical, unlike a Broadway musical, can be a quality movie without elaborate dances. In this article, I compare two movie musicals based on successful Lerner and Loewe Broadway musicals - "My Fair Lady" and "Camelot" - and I discuss why "My Fair Lady" was an acclaimed, award-winning movie that is still viewed and loved by millions of people and why "Camelot" has become a mostly forgotten film.

Both plays were successes on Broadway, although "My Fair Lady" did receive more praises than "Camelot" and it ran for a significantly longer time. Nevertheless, "Camelot" had a healthy initial Broadway run and both plays have had three short-run revivals on Broadway. Also, both plays earned Tony awards for their male leads and Tony nominations for Julie Andrews, the leading female star in both plays. Yet, the movies based on the plays had vastly different outcomes, with "My Fair Lady" garnering eight Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Actor, and Camelot earning only three minor awards. So, where did "Camelot," the movie, go wrong?

Plot and Screenplay

Both plays and movies were based on good works of literature - "My Fair Lady" on the play "Pygmalion" by George Bernard Shaw, and "Camelot" on the book "The Once and Future King" by T. H. White. The screenplays were both authored by an experienced and award-winning author, Alan Jay Lerner, who also wrote the lyrics for the songs in both works. Therefore, the story lines and screenplays do not seem to be where the differences lie. In fact, the plot of "Camelot," with its historic setting, romantic entanglements and scenes of chivalry and war, made it a better vehicle for film than "My Fair Lady" with its dialog-filled, actionless scenes.

Quality Music

The scores from "My Fair Lady" and "Camelot," both written by Frederick Loewe and Alan Jay Lerner, are wonderful, with a good blend of beautiful melodies and sometimes poignant and other times humorous lyrics. Both shows had one major hit romantic ballad - "On the Street Where You Live" for "My Fair Lady" and "If Ever I Would Leave You" for "Camelot" - and both songs were dubbed in the movies by professional singers. The songs for the male lead are more melodious in "Camelot" and, at least in the movie version, the male lead, Richard Harris, had a better singing

voice than Rex Harrison had in "My Fair Lady." With basically equivalent scores, it seems that it is not the music that distinguishes the two works.

Casting

Although Richard Harris was the perfect King Arthur, casting is one major area where the movie version of "Camelot" fell short of its potential. Both plays starred Julie Andrews and her beautiful voice added much to the already great scores, but, unfortunately, she was not cast as the female lead in either film. However, the producers of the movie version of "My Fair Lady" had the good sense to hire Audrey Hepburn who was perfectly cast as Eliza Doolittle. She had the innocence and fragility needed for the role with just enough fire in her to finally rebel against Henry Higgins, while still leaving the audience sympathetic to her. On the other hand, the female lead in "Camelot," Vanessa Redgrave, although an extremely gifted actress, was miscast as Guenevere. She presents the character as a cold, selfish woman who is indifferent to the tragedy she brings to her husband and his empire. Unfortunately, she was permitted to do her own singing with the result of a lessening of the impact of some of the songs in "Camelot." On the other hand, Audrey Hepburn's singing was dubbed by Marni Nixon, a singer with a beautiful, trained voice.

The casting of the third lead character in each film also differed in quality. In "My Fair Lady," Colonel Pickering was played by a distinguished English actor, Wilfrid Hyde-White, whose acting was excellent. Unfortunately, the key role of Lancelot in "Camelot" was played by a novice Italian actor, Franco Nero, with limited command of English. Although he certainly fit the role physically, with his exceptional good looks, his acting was stiff and his delivery of lines was almost robotic.

The male leads in both films were perfect. In fact, the casting of Richard Harris probably saved "Camelot" from being a disaster. He was so well-cast as King Arthur that after the film, he became associated with the role and played it in several major productions, including one on Broadway and one in London.

Direction

Both movies had well-known and well-respected directors, but their approaches to directing the films were vastly different. George Cukor, the director of "My Fair Lady," let the story and music give the movie its strength and character. There were no special effects used and no unique filming techniques, but, rather, just good direction of excellent actors and actresses performing on studio lots. Cukor used the strong screenplay and beautiful music of "My Fair Lady" to guide his direction.

On the other hand, Joshua Logan, the director of "Camelot," used far too many close-ups that had the audience focused on the leads' make-up rather than on the strong plot and music. In some scenes, instead of presenting a natural context for appreciating the songs or dialog, Logan chose to fill the large screen with the actors' faces, resulting in a distracting rather than enhancing effect.

Conclusion

Although both "My Fair Lady" and "Camelot" had the potential to be great films, "Camelot" lacked two of the four factors necessary for a quality movie musical. These factors, strong story line and well-written screenplay, quality music, great casting, and effective direction, could be used to compare other movie musicals, for example, "Gigi" and "Brigadoon" or "Oklahoma" and "South Pacific," and the results would be similar. A movie musical that is deficient in even one of the four factors could make the difference between a film that lives on for generations or one that gets lost on a shelf.

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