

CANDIDE

A Proposal for Staging

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I. ARTIST STATEMENT

The Show

What is *Candide*? A loaded question, if ever there was one, with a variety of places where one may begin answering.

As Rodgers and Hammerstein once opined that the beginning is a very fine place to start, I'll open with the source material. Voltaire's *Candide*, first published in 1759, is a picaresque, satirical novella, only eighty-seven pages long, in which, as John Wells once put it, "every page takes us to a different country and every paragraph contains some new adventure." No target is left unscathed; religious hypocrisy (particularly that of the Catholic Church), the corrupting power of money, the uselessness of philosophical speculation, and the contrast between optimism (particularly the bland sort favored by then-popular philosopher Leibnitz) and reality, all come in for sharp scrutiny. As true as its points ring even today, it's certainly not what one might consider typical inspirational fodder for a musical.

And yet, somehow, it was. In the mid-to-late Fifties, for *Candide*, Leonard Bernstein created possibly his most substantial achievement as a composer, an immaculate score consisting of close to two hours of music and over thirty numbers: solos, duets, trios, quartets, ensembles, choruses and purely orchestral music, frequently interspersed or combined with spoken dialogue. Combined with varying degrees of book involvement on the part of Lillian Hellman, Hugh Wheeler, and John Caird, and inspired lyrics from such legendary wits as Richard Wilbur, John LaTouche, Stephen Sondheim, and Dorothy Parker, it's been fussing and scampering about on stage, in one form or another, ever since.

My Background with the Show

Since I first read about Hal Prince and Hugh Wheeler's initial high-spirited pocket-sized revamp in Craig Zadan's book *Sondheim & Co.*, I've been quietly fascinated by *Candide*. Like Tim Rice's *Chess*, many of Frank Wildhorn's works, and other much-altered musicals that followed, it seemingly defies revision. Naturally, various discussion outlets for musical theater fans have defenders of every version under the sun, some of whom hold forth at length on how they'd handle the show. Ultimately, even its most ardent admirers doubt the perfect *Candide* will ever exist, simply because, as Monty Python's *Life of Brian* once put it, "there's no pleasing some people."

Typical for me, I once hubristically decided I'd fix the unfixable. I'd never heard the score, nor read any scripts, but it shouldn't take familiarity to determine which ingredients from variants of a single recipe made the best dish, should it? I thought it a simple dramaturgical exercise: determine the working elements from the show's many versions, do the same to the score, create a working synopsis from my research, develop a script from that, and then construct my proposal around the result. If you, the reader, are laughing, perhaps you're a *Candide* fan who realizes, sooner than I did at the time, just how misguided I was.

Sometime later, I've come to accept, after much discussion, that each fan considers completely different things to be essential to *Candide*. Perhaps one production *couldn't* possibly please all, or even most, of them. The better one knows it, the more likely they are to enjoy the game of "twenty questions": what music does it include? Sung by which characters, in what order, with whose lyrics? Which story does it tell, and where does it go to tell it?

But prolonged study of the piece and its numerous versions has led me to believe that, at the very least, I've worked out what elements *I'd* prefer to use if I was to direct it. Whatever else it is, it's my take. This labor born in ego became one of love; I hope that I might be able to bring it to reality.

II. PLAY ANALYSIS

My reader, if they're currently seeking employment or know someone else who is, may be familiar with the "need experience to get experience" paradox that many people complain about today: a job won't hire you if you lack experience, but in order to have experience on your résumé, you need that job to hire you. A similar phenomenon is at play when one attempts to study *Candide*: you can't properly analyze the show if you haven't decided which version to present, but in order to decide which version is best to present; you've got to analyze the show first. (On a semi-related note, I wonder what the hell they called it before the term "catch-22" was coined.)

Let's start by looking at those versions available for licensing. Lillian Hellman's original 1956 book – and variations thereof – is off the table¹, so we can safely discard that from consideration. That leaves us with:

1. **The 1974 version** – adapted (read: rewritten) by Hugh Wheeler with additional lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, an economical one-act zany farce.² In revisiting this version, it struck me as strangely reminiscent, consciously or otherwise, of Stephen Schwartz's *Pippin*, albeit with a more operatic score. In both, a young "medieval" man is forced out into the world to discover himself, and said world, far more depressing and cruel than the life-affirming, transcendent place he was led to believe it was, beats the shit out of him, leading him to learn a lesson of compromise. Reading in Martin Gottfried's Bob Fosse biography, *All His Jazz*, about the sour grapes with which Hal Prince greeted *Pippin* because he perceived Fosse as ripping off ideas introduced in *Cabaret*, one wonders if recasting *Candide* with wide-eyed teenagers and reinventing it as (more or less) a presentation by a close-knit, bright, catchpenny, inventive troupe of players, in the process elevating an otherwise episodic, one-joke show with diminishing comic returns inherent in the story, was not, on some level, his response.
2. **The 1982 opera house version** – a two-act expansion of the 1974 revision incorporating more of Leonard Bernstein's music, created originally for the New York City Opera and since performed by many international companies. This version, at least in essence, also appeared on Broadway in 1997, and was widely regarded by critics as over-egging the pudding.
3. **The 1988 Scottish Opera version** – another two-act, which premiered at the Scottish Opera, formed the basis for Bernstein's "definitive" performance and recording in 1989, and incorporated nearly every piece of music the show had ever included. The book is nominally credited to Wheeler, but unlike the first two versions on this list, it is questionable how much was actually his work.

¹ Funnily enough, though, cursory research (i.e., simply reading Voltaire's original) makes it plain that many incidents and elements incorporated into later versions – as little as Maximilian's name, and as big as the interrogation during the auto-da-fé, the Paris waltz, the Venice gambling casino, and *Candide*'s lament following Cunegonde's purported butchering and bitter sadness at her fall from grace – originated with Hellman, not the source material.

² Clearly the adaptors felt *Candide* was one of those works where there was too much, all of it wonderful, but something had to go, yards and yards of beautiful material one has to cut into a functioning garment, to use the tailor metaphor.

4. **The 1993 concert version** – adapted by Bernstein and satirist John Wells from the 1988 version above, retaining the “completist” score combined with a slightly more palatable “concert narrative” that entrusts most of the plot’s heavy lifting to a narrator and keeps the contentious “book” to barest minimum.
5. **The 1999 Royal National Theatre version** – commissioned by Trevor Nunn and adapted and directed by John Caird, this version, to quote Caird, was “a new version [...] based on the idea of the Hugh Wheeler book but drawing heavily from the novel as primary source material.” Slightly reimagined for a larger ensemble than 1974, it boasted new lyrics both from Sondheim and from Richard Wilbur to suit the new storyline, and had three goals: “to include more of Voltaire’s story with all its moral complexity and mordant wit, to develop the major characters more fully, and to establish a new order for the songs that would knit them more tightly into the story.” Aside from said rewrites, the score was basically 1988 all over again, with orchestrations revamped to fit commonly available musical theater resources and minor pruning and deletion of musical material to suit what made the most dramaturgical sense to Caird’s adaptation.

So, how does one choose? With five versions on the market, it’s become impossible to simply pick one; good things are scattered around all of them. As theater historian and director John Ellis once put it, “It may be the Rubik’s Cube of musicals.” In other words, it depends on what you’re looking for, and the resources available to you.

- The two opera house editions and the concert version, at their barest essence, are about the score more than almost anything else – if you’ve got great singers and a large orchestra, choose any of those three and you’ll have a love feast for your musical talent base. However, all of them suffer, to some extent, from attempting to take a more serious approach after the 1974 version had been criticized by *Candide* purists/devotees for its frivolities; apparently no one explained to Bernstein et al. that seriousness need not equal solemnity.
- Of the opera house editions, the ’88 Scottish Opera (and, by extension, the concert version) is the most musically complete, but Bernstein’s urgent desire to “legitimize” the score does more harm than it’s worth for the new material³, whereas the ’82 version boasts a very large portion of the score performed by a large orchestra and sung by operatic voices, but isn’t nearly as overwhelming.
- The 1974 version has the advantage of being a clever, fast-paced, madcap, energetic evening, with a healthy dose of humor (that rarely, if ever, errs on the side of good taste when a joke is to be had) for the put upon husbands and easily distracted folks in the audience, but it’s dated, somewhat flip, and musically inferior to the rest (in terms of both arrangement and vocal performance, if the cast recording is any indicator of the talent that usually does this version), plus, if you go with the ’82 opera house rendition, you’re getting basically the same production with additional music. If the final choice is between ’74 and ’82, the decision boils down to a matter of your audience’s taste and attention span and your company’s pools of talent and resources.

³ Not to mention that it has the effrontery to declare itself the “final revised version.” As Cunegonde would say, “Ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

But none of this solves the basic problem of which version of the show works best, just what's most feasible for a director and their company. To me, in order to determine what works best, one has to first determine what *Candide* was originally meant to be.

After doing loads of research that left me befogged as before, I chanced upon a Leonard Bernstein quote that finally gave me the answer: "Voltaire's masterpiece was a tough, skinny novella [...] which inspired [...] me to have a bash at it musically. The challenge to us was to dramatize and musicalize the stinging satire of *Candide* without turning it into burlesque." The novella inspired the lot – time to re-read the novella. It proved very enlightening. The original 1759 *Candide* caused a major stir in social and political circles upon its publication, and unfortunately, much of its satire still rings true in the 21st century, especially the ultimate message: it's a big world out there, it will throw various challenges our way, and even with all the optimism one can muster, not everything will be perfect, but we all just have to keep plugging along. It became clear that part of the problem in 1956 was the audience; at that time, they weren't receptive to a darkly humorous musical that was as sardonic and angry about the state of things⁴ as *Candide* was, or at least not nearly as receptive as an audience would be today. But the burden didn't lie solely on the audience, or it wouldn't need so much adjustment.

So, if the child was to match its progenitor, with the score hopefully serving the plot needs of Voltaire's original novella, how would it look? The source material had a more serious side, but also a lightness that couldn't be neglected either; there are points at which irony must turn serious, but Voltaire, as a satirist, was a political loose cannon, so it still needs to be funny. What's needed is balance, as much in the music as in the dialogue. While there needs to be room for some sections, including the "Ballad of Eldorado" and the concluding "Make Our Garden Grow," to work on a more heartfelt level, much of the score – the best-known numbers, the overture and the coloratura parody-showpiece "Glitter and Be Gay," are perfect examples – needs to sparkle and fizz, and any attendant script needs to support all of that without feeling schizophrenic.

Bearing this in mind, I picked the underdog: the 1999 version. The arrangements are refreshingly designed more for musical theater than operatic voices, and the placement of music is far more satisfactory than in previous editions, with most numbers in their original contexts and order; further, the aspects of seriousness and satire seem in reasonable balance both in book and in choice of music. Caird's adapted book works very well; it owes some to Hugh Wheeler's work before him, but captures Voltaire's feel effortlessly, and solves the very real problems of the original. The intricacy, emotional quality, and scope of Bernstein's legendary score is enhanced by this script rather than having all the depth and coherence of a jukebox musical. The songs are now tailored to lead into, and support, the points that Voltaire makes rather than being shoehorned into a different story, even if it happens to be based on the same material.

Having chosen which version of the play to analyze, we now move on to actual study. What makes *Candide* tick, at least in this version? Well, most importantly, Caird's

⁴ The musical has always been as much a commentary on the present as a restatement of the past; the original long-discarded Lillian Hellman script used the novella as a jumping-off point for her own statement about how what we might call institutional naïveté in America allows evil to flourish.

adaptation resolves a major problem with the original production(s): no script really works unless at least one character has a dramatic arc; otherwise a musical is just a pantomime. In previous productions, Candide either isn't young or never matures. Per the original story, he needs both, and Caird's script achieves just that: Candide is clearly a boyish innocent, and it takes a world of hurt – a journey between optimism and pessimism – for him to mature⁵, and to ultimately believe that a more natural way of life is the answer.

The key element in this is the inclusion of the overwrought, Puccini-reminiscent “Nothing More Than This” in the Venice scene in Act II, which gives Candide's arc a real climax and sews up the show's plot. After many travels that have mercilessly separated and reunited them, Cunegonde tries to steal a bag of money Candide's holding; the mask (literally) drops and he recognizes her... and realizes who she really is. This is more than merely a song of bitter disappointment in love, than “bad sex” (if you will); this is the moment when Candide finally sees that everything he has believed in his whole life – spoon-fed to him by Pangloss, still unbelievably optimistic despite all that he has endured and seen – is a lie, and that by believing in the lie he has been complicit in bringing things to this place. It's also Cunegonde's moment of transformation; she realizes how low she's become, and follows him as he leaves.

It's the moment the whole book has been working toward from the first scene; it *should* have a song. If there is ever a moment of heightened emotion, it's when he finally sees who Cunegonde is, and sees himself. “Nothing More Than This” is a perfect example of dramatic action in song; without it, the realization that follows and gives birth to “Make Our Garden Grow” is empty, the finale a mere static song. And yet many versions before 1988 removed it, which is like cutting the last scene in *Hamlet* because you don't want corpses. If you build a story to a climax, and then cut the climax, you've got a climax-less show. Caird wisely recognized the necessity of its inclusion.

Unlike the opera house versions, however, Caird also recognizes that including as much of Bernstein's score as possible, even if it interferes with the show's integrity, is unnecessary. A good example is his editing of the “Auto-da-fé” scene to focus strictly on the Inquisition and make it more dramatically germane to the story in the process, dropping Pangloss' patter song about the pox which duplicates the earlier “Dear Boy” in plot terms. Knowing what to cut and when is important to the balance I've stressed earlier is necessary.

We've got our play. Now to stage it!

⁵ That he matures is especially important. My reading of Caird is that, so long as that arc is played successfully, it matters little whether or not he emerges a hero (in the traditional sense) by show's end.

III. VISION

Dramaturgy

To briefly recap, we've established our starting point. In assessing the three librettos (Hellman, Wheeler, and Caird), I've settled on Caird's as the closest to Voltaire, and ergo my ideal launch pad and song-stack. However, in his quest to faithfully adapt the novel, I feel Caird's just a tad... literal. Huge chunks of his script are devoted to expository narration from Voltaire himself, at times hewing word for word to the original text. For the storyline to work at least as well as it does in the source, it has to travel at a brisk pace, and without lightness of touch, a lot of Caird's script – and its over-reliance on Voltaire as narrator in particular – could play as dead air.

With that in mind, I'd cut the more "descriptive" speeches (for example, his narration of Candide and Cunegonde's excitement before "Oh, Happy We" or of Candide's expulsion from the castle shortly thereafter) and simply stage each such moment, which helps pacing considerably and, if presented as an imaginative stage picture rather than a narrator's comment, allowing the actors to act rather than react, might help the audience actually care about these silly people as more than cartoons. The key wouldn't be cutting whole scenes or parts thereof but "concentrating" them by editing them to the essential, making the necessary points in sharp, swift strokes.

Music and Lyrics

As much as I shout from the rafters that this comic operetta is refreshing when performed with musical theater voices, the score should never sacrifice its opera roots. The acting and staging are important, but Bernstein's music is (self-described as) a Valentine card to European music, dotted with European dance forms (i.e., the gavotte, mazurka, polka, schottische, waltz, etc.) and gentle ribbing of European operatic conventions⁶, and it's imperative that the music's sound be treated with the respect it deserves. With that in mind, I'd retain Bernstein and Hershy Kay's sumptuous original orchestrations and vocal arrangements, insofar as they conform to the Caird script.

I recognize in saying this that it doesn't make my task any easier. In addition to huge changes of sets (*more about that momentarily*) and a Candide who can really act, I'm looking for a chorus and cast that approach operatic talent. But presentation, as they say, is half the meal.

Casting

When it comes to *Candide*, cast size is an issue. Obviously, a large cast is ideal, both for strong vocals and to better accommodate the many smaller roles. To companies with vast resources, the most reasonable character plot is to have the leads only double the characters that are important for them to double (and Caird suggests certain doublings

⁶ To cite some easy examples, "You Were Dead, You Know" pastiches bel canto, "Glitter and Be Gay" is straight-up homage to the "Jewel Song" from Gounod's *Faust*, and you'd swear Gilbert and Sullivan were in the room when "Dear Boy" was born.

of roles in his script to that end), with an ensemble of enough size to make a “crowd” for the appropriate scenes to play the rest.

However, I'd like to emphasize the surreal, almost claustrophobic atmosphere of the show and its characters as they are assailed by many trials and tribulations, with multiple doublings – and even tripling – of roles. The cast breakdown for *Candide*, while on the larger side, would still be small compared to previous productions of the show; ideally, I'd confine it to a (relatively) tight group of 20 people, all of whom (the initial leads being possible exceptions) double as ensemble at appropriate junctures.

The cast would break down as follows, more or less in order of importance:

- VOLTAIRE / PANGLOSS
- CANDIDE
- CUNEGONDE
- MAXIMILIAN / AGENT OF THE INQUISITION
- PAQUETTE / LOBEIRO GIRL
- THE OLD WOMAN / THE BARONESS OF THUNDER-TEN-TRONCK / COURTESAN / ELDORADO SHEEP
- CACAMBO / DRILL SERGEANT
- MARTIN / THE BARON OF THUNDER-TEN-TRONCK / JAMES, THE ANABAPTIST / CHARLES EDWARD STEWART, RIGHTFUL KING OF ENGLAND
- THE GOVERNOR / CAPTAIN / INQUISITOR
- VANDERDENDUR / THE GRAND INQUISITOR
- CORPORAL / FRENCH AMBASSADOR / MONKEY / TUNISIAN CAPTAIN / TSAR IVAN OF ALL THE RUSSIAS
- DUTCH MINISTER / GRAND SULTAN ACHMET THE THIRD OF TURKEY
- THE MINISTER'S WIFE / COURTESAN
- DON ISAACHAR / AGENT OF THE INQUISITION / KING THEODORE OF CORSICA
- PORTUGUESE SAILOR / VIENNESE AMBASSADOR / AGENT OF THE INQUISITION / ADJUTANT
- INQUISITOR / ELDORADO SHEEP / KING STANISLAUS OF POLAND
- COURTESAN / LOBEIRO GIRL
- KING OF ELDORADO / KING HERMANN AUGUSTUS OF POLAND AND SAXONY
- QUEEN OF ELDORADO / COURTESAN
- SURINAMESE SLAVE / MONKEY

General Staging and Design Ideas

It's difficult to overstate the production designer's dilemma on this show: *Candide* takes place on five different continents, with a new adventure and location on damn near every page. Each design for the show over the years has been an attempt to tackle that issue, and each works with a varying degree of success.

For example, a particularly clever 2006 production by Robert Carsen, which played, among other venues, the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, decided to comment on contemporary world politics, with a decidedly anti-American slant, with imagery the likes of which hasn't been seen since the days of Tom O'Horgan. It was set inside a giant television in America (presenting “Volt-Air TV”) at some unspecified point in the

1950s or 1960s (though there were references to events spanning the past sixty years), with Voltaire flipping channels between certain scenes. The overture was accompanied by a film clip depicting various aspects of American life, principally the "American Dream" (white middle-class American families of the 1950s in their happy coexistence with new cars, refrigerators, blenders and other gadgets of the age). It was an inventive compilation with each new musical theme coinciding with a new theme in the film: the fast tune from "Glitter and Be Gay," for example, took us to the glamor of Monroe-era Hollywood, and the splash of the final cadence became an exploding Coca-Cola sponsorship logo. We were then introduced to Act I by a cartoon Voltaire giving a wink and a one-fingered salute in the manner of a Monty Python animation vignette.

From there, each number expanded on this critical examination of the American Dream. The first scene took place in front of the Kennedy White House, with Candide et al. as children of the First Family resident at the White House, the Baron and Baroness clear analogues to JFK and Jackie, and Westphalia (re-branded "West Failure") all too obviously Washington, D.C. Cunegonde's "Glitter and Be Gay" was a perfect replication of the Marilyn Monroe number "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend." "Auto-da-fé" became a cross between a House Un-American Activities Committee meeting (the very phenomenon that inspired the initial writing of this scene in 1956) and a lynching, complete with a gathering of Ku Klux Klan with flaming torches. "We Are Women" was presented as a sort of hilarious cabaret number, with Cunegonde and the Old Woman as two unconvincing-looking showgirls waving feathers. "The Kings' Barcarolle," in a headline-grabbing move, re-envisioned Voltaire's five exiled kings as contemporary politicians, each wearing bathing trunks in the colors of their nation's flag, sunbathing on inflatable mattresses in the middle of a huge oil slick.

The show as a whole was a reflection of the true American landscape: Mormon proselytizers in Utah, hippies in San Francisco, Jesuits in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Indians at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, and dancers in Hawaii. Venice was re-imagined as Las Vegas, with Eldorado a mirage in the desert on a Texan highway. The final image was a striking one: as the company sang "Make Our Garden Grow," stepping outside the television into "real life," projections of pollution and the spoiling of nature were seen, perfectly subverting Bernstein's potently positive music, and conveying more of the ambiguity of Voltaire's message.

I don't know if I'd go as full-bore as Carsen did, but that brand of cleverness one so rarely sees in today's theater, that edge, passion, and impact one might achieve from, say, Terry Gilliam if restrained by the confines of the theater (the chaos of *Candide* would so appeal to him), is the right fit for a show like this. In a smaller setting, in terms of both design and staging, Hal Prince's environmental in-the-round version, involving the audience by surrounding them, which played Broadway in 1974, has never been bettered in terms of atmosphere and logistics.

The only design notes I have, after much thinking (and over-thinking, and re-thinking), is that my *Candide* calls for a design that seems light, and careening, swift scene changes, and very quickly changing color and style contrasts as they flit around the world; in other words, everywhere they go they're "easily assimilated" into that country's style, except Candide (the stalwart). I also like the idea of having a large globe

implanted in the proscenium arch, or at the front of the stage, which spins madly when the scene changes and then suddenly stops on the country where they've landed.