

# **Edited Highlights**

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**By Robert M.J. Morris**

My flatmate, aside from a breadth of knowledge matched only by his vigorous inactivity, has a large collection of anecdotes – so large, in fact, that it must be the result of a happy and absorbing existence stealing other people’s memories. One of the most recent yarns relates to an attempted modernist sculpture at school where, having finished a piece, he has to demonstrate the sculpting to other members of the art department. The result of the subsequent tap should be obvious to anyone raised on Warner Bros. cartoons and, though I hesitate to mention their name, the Chuckle Brothers<sup>1</sup> and I think deftly validates a truism beloved of mothers throughout the land: don’t pick at it, it’ll never get better!

It’s no surprise, though, that artists as adults ignore the advice given as children. Instead we often take the words of the poet Paul Valery that “an artist never really finishes his work, he merely abandons it” as a licence to just keep playing. Adopting the approach propounded by that of another great commentator of our times: “because we want to, because we want to” cannot be artistically justified when the field of artistic endeavour is littered with the bloodied corpses of works, which should have been left alone.<sup>2</sup>

Some of those corpses are amusing, but the existence of others induces in me the kind of apoplexy I normally reserve for when someone LOLs in my direction. *Chess* is the first example that springs to mind. It has a concept album as close to perfection as any musical could wish for; soaring intricate melodies blending seamlessly with solid well-crafted pop songs, all displaying a lyrical playfulness and panache of which W.S. Gilbert would be proud – and two hit singles<sup>3</sup>. Subsequent stagings have reworked the show ad-nauseum and are generally regarded as having weakened the whole (although the one new song for Broadway - “Someone Else’s Story” - is sublime).

The cause of this is actually rather simple: by the time the first production hit the West End, the cold war – pivotal to the plot – was starting to thaw. In response, attempts were made to bring the story up to date and restore relevance to the narrative – even though relevance and musical theatre are rarely comfortable bedfellows. Thankfully, the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary tour saw Tim Rice realising that “first ideas are often the best”<sup>4</sup> and placing the book in its proper historical setting, restoring the order of various songs, and finally lending the proceedings a certain cohesion. But until then, continued fiddling greatly undermined what had been a highly anticipated and well-regarded work.

The blame for all of this must be laid firmly with its creators, and tragically I don't think this is an uncommon occurrence; the truth is that it's a weakness of all artists that their close involvement tends to negate any form of objectivity. You can keep adding ideas, new points, reworking sections as much as you like but, as the story of *Chess* shows, the chances are you will go past a point of improvement and straight back round to being bad and wrong.

What's needed, of course, is discipline from outside the creative process. Jobbing hacks like me have the luxury of both a deadline and an editor, which tend to stop the rot from spreading. For writers of all kinds they are vital since they have an objectivity it is hard to maintain on your own. The success of my own work depends entirely on the patience and perpetually raised eyebrow of an editor who knows his stuff. Arguing over tiny semantic details and offering points of view which conflict with the writer's own mean infinitely more robust work is produced (even if innocent bystanders<sup>5</sup> feel the comments flying back and forth are rather Statler-and-Waldorf-esque).

Crucially, such input should reflect the casual reader of the text, not the initiated: it's vaguely unpleasant that some artists play up to those people who "get" their work and denigrate those who don't. Art either enhances the lives of its audience (a noble aim in itself), or challenges them to think about their world. Of course it's even better if it can do both, but in any case there seems little point in preaching to the choir.<sup>6</sup> At best it's pointless and at worst it's cronyism, so it is in the best interests of all for the editor to lean towards the audience view.

The need for a perspective outside the creative process is clear when examining the increasing popularity of "director's cuts" of films. Directors too are artists with a vision of their own – sometimes sensitive to the material they are filming, sometimes not. As it has burgeoned in popularity, the trend itself has lost control; material is added purely because it's extra, not because it's any good. The benefits are usually very little for anyone but the most ardent fans - who generally aren't blessed with a functioning sense of perspective anyway (and are in any case our dear old friends in the choir).

The Doctor Who Special Edition DVDs are an interesting example. The Curse of Fenric is notable because it's already had one extended release, supervised by John Nathan Turner, where a lot of the additional material which had been shot for the story was still rejected. Only the best material was put

back in, anything else was left out despite the director's wish to include it. The result? A darn good release: a fast paced, tightly plotted episodic drama and with only a few dodgy performances from the leads.

The new version, however, was based on the late director's notes, written with the gently insane intention of bending a four part episodic structure into a movie, which by convention has a three-act structure. It puts back material even JNT rejected, including one scene so badly delivered that it makes the frequently derided "purrrrrre eeeeeevil" moment look like an Oscar-winner. (Similarly, the Five Doctors special edition – leaving aside the Mr Whippy moments – has longer establishing shots, which only serve to slow down the action.) It is clear again that stronger editorial control and less acceptance of artistic whim would have been in order in both cases.

Of course sometimes those in charge get it horribly wrong - which, lest we forget, is why Director's Cuts started appearing in the first place. Misjudging the audience and totally undermining the artist are sure signs of bad editorial instincts and it's a wonder how some remain in their jobs. A case in point is the second Voice of the Beehive album. After the well regarded *Let it Bee*, the record company generally interfered with the writing and production of *Honey Lingers* to an extent which beggars belief and totally undermined the band's confidence, finally leading to an album that has several producers' paw-prints on each track.

Even to a Stock, Aitken and Waterman apologist like me, getting PWL in to work on an album by a rock band seems plain crazy. Yet the craziness ensued, removing the raw edges and resulting in a desperately sludgy sound. Not all decisions were bad, of course: at least one good choice was the removal of a rather odd chorus from *I'm Shooting Cupid* to make the song seem less fragmented. Sadly, when the rejected demo versions were released last year it is clear just how bad many executive decisions were and it's no wonder they broke up shortly after.<sup>7</sup> This isn't just restricted to little-known indie bands; the Beatles suffered a similar problem with their *Let it Be*, as the original intentionally bare recordings were then handed to Phil Spector for reproduction with his famed "wall of sound".

So a balance has to be struck. To be fair those of us who house artistic and creative souls tend to be a temperamental, pompous and self-involved lot who frequently deserve a slap round the chops.

Then we go and compound this by never relinquishing control and subsequently ruining our own creations. It's no wonder that the annual Turner prize gets such negative publicity; never mind the quality of the work itself, the British public is entirely justified in not really liking this sort of behaviour. A little more humility and an acceptance of guidance from an objective external source really wouldn't go amiss from time to time.

Despite all this, the right influences need to be brought to bear. A sensitive understanding of the material is a vital quality and chaos will ensue without it, and you need look no further than the U.S. version of *Coupling* to see what happens if there is such a disparity. It's no good having executive influence that tries to take work and make it out to be something it is not.<sup>8</sup> That's not to say that the powers that be should agree with the intent, or necessarily like the artist, but at least they should understand the material and be a treat it with respect, curbing any excesses that could undermine the work.

Simply put, a working relationship between artist and editor is something that is in the best interests of all forms of artistic endeavour. An uncontrolled creative urge or insensitive interference is not.

<sup>1</sup> There is a school of thought which suggests that the Chuckle Brothers can be invoked in much the same way as the sandman. No documented evidence has been found to support this, but we can safely assume that it's happened at least once and the perpetrators are simply too ashamed of themselves to admit to it.

<sup>2</sup> And, of course, the French.

<sup>3</sup> There were a couple more videos filmed actually, presumably as potential singles. *Nobody's Side* is particularly notable, so if you've ever wanted to see a power-haired, power-cardiganed Elaine Paige wobbling around in Fritz Lang's worst nightmare, head over to [www.chessthemusical.com](http://www.chessthemusical.com).

<sup>4</sup> Tim Rice's own words, in fact, from the introduction to the Samuel French libretto. It just makes you wish he'd had such clarity of thought eight years previously. The current stage show is allegedly the definitive rendering but I can't comment on this since I refuse to buy a CD or DVD recorded entirely in Swedish.

<sup>5</sup> We could debate endlessly as to whether such a term could ever be applied to one L.R.W. Binding, Esq. Opinion is heavily toward the negative but we thought we'd give him the benefit of the doubt.

<sup>6</sup> Interesting expression this. It implies that choristers are suffused with knowledge of the divine and thus do not need the pastor's guidance. In fact, they're a doddering bunch of narcoleptic buffoons. Either way, preaching to them is particularly unfulfilling.

<sup>7</sup> The two girls went on their own to make the final glorious Beehive album "Sex and Misery" which is possibly my favourite record ever. It is, not to put too fine a point on it, just glorious.

<sup>8</sup> Somebody should perhaps tell this to the Ministry of Defence.