

# West End Boy

## How to drum in musical theatre

Widely known as an almost constant source of work, the **Musicians' Union** takes a look at the role of drummers in the West End

**T**his month we meet up with Rick Finlay, freelance drummer and percussionist, whose CV includes major shows like *Blood Brothers*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Chess* and countless others. He writes for, plays in, and manages world/jazz group Just East and has performed with most of the UK's leading jazz artists.

### RICK, YOU'VE SPENT A LOT OF YOUR CAREER PLAYING IN WEST END MUSICALS; HOW DID YOU GET INTO THAT KIND OF WORK?

"I've been lucky enough to have worked almost continuously in the West End for around 30 years. For me it started with a drum student who was also an actor and introduced me to the composer of a new touring show back in 1983. For others it might be depping for a friend or colleague who has already got a foot in the door."

### ANY TIPS FOR DRUMMERS LOOKING TO WORK IN MUSICAL THEATRE?

"I can't tell you how many fellow drummers have approached me to sit in the pit and watch a show from that perspective... it's certainly in the hundreds, so obviously there's a lot of hunger for

terms and conditions. Anyone wanting to work in that world needs to be sensitive to the delicate ecosystem between musicians, musical directors, actors and production team. I've seen young players come in to watch a show and disturb that ecosystem, perhaps pushing themselves too hard, or picking the wrong moment and place to discuss workplace issues."

### WHAT IS IT LIKE DOING A REALLY LONG RUN OF A SHOW? DIDN'T YOU DO MOST OF THE RUN OF *BLOOD BROTHERS*?

"Yes, and a happy 20-plus years that was too. For sure you get times when you get itchy feet, but one trick is to get out and do as much other playing as you can. Most drummers would give anything to have regular, flexible work, but the real joy is sitting behind your instrument every night and delivering the goods. That does amazing things for your playing and your attitude. Most importantly you learn to enjoy the company and character of the people you work with. That's what gets everyone through life isn't it? People first, and music a close second! I treasure a quote from Jarvis Cocker: 'Life is like the car, and your art, or whatever you produce,



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the work, understandably. Of those, maybe three or four have gone on to build sustained work in the field. What makes them special? It's not just the playing: most of those drummers could handle the music just fine. So it's everything else: how you handle yourself, how you get on with others and, crucially, how you fit in with the overall culture."

### ISN'T THAT TRUE OF ALL KINDS OF MUSICAL SITUATIONS?

"Definitely, but every world is different. The West End community of musicians, for example, numbering in the hundreds if you include depts, is very aware of the industrial and political climate in which they work. It's not always overtly expressed, but there is great pride in the standard of performance and a commensurate sense of entitlement to respectful and decent working life,

is the caravan. As long as the car's in front of the caravan you can go places."

### HOW HAS THE MU HELPED YOU IN YOUR CAREER?

"I joined in 1979. It's been the backbone to my whole working life. Not just the nuts and bolts stuff: getting paid, protecting your rights, getting advice on everything from running a record label to negotiating fees. The stuff I've learned from them about what it's really like to work as a musician in every sphere has been crucial – that's not an obvious benefit, but it's helped me deal with the downs as well as the ups. The more active I've become, on committees and negotiations, the more value I've derived from it. So I'd encourage anyone to get more involved – the more you put in the more you get back."

**Musicians' Union**



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over a hundred years and 30,000 professional and student musicians currently benefit from the MU's comprehensive range of services. These include career and business advice, rights protection, free instrument insurance, free contract and partnership advice, £10 million public liability cover, legal advice and assistance plus access to a network of musicians of all ages across the UK. For anyone serious about being a working musician, whether in the live arena, in the recording world, as a teacher or writer/composer, the MU gives musicians a voice – individually and collectively – to help nurture and improve the industry and to ensure that every member has the support and protection they need.

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