

The Good Old Bad Old Days

On July 20, 1961, a new musical opened at the Queen's Theatre in England. The musical was called *Stop the World, I Want to Get Off*, and starred Anthony Newley. It was directed by Anthony Newley. It was co-written by Anthony Newley, along with Leslie Bricusse. With a simple unit set, evocative lighting, and small cast, *Stop the World* took critics and audiences by surprise with its simple story chronicling the life of Littlechap, from little chap to old chap, through childhood, marriage, affairs, politics, and all life's little highs and lows, all told through captivating songs and witty and topical dialogue. It was like a breath of fresh air and, at the time, a unique musical theatre experience. It was an instant sensation, running over 500 performances.

David Merrick saw it and immediately made a deal to bring the show to New York. It opened on October 3, 1962 at the Shubert Theatre, with Newley and Anna Quayle (repeating her UK success as all the adult women in Littlechap's life), and, as in the UK, was an instant sensation. Thanks to a few cover versions of the songs, people were humming the score before the show even began, and it yielded several standards, such as "What Kind of Fool Am I?" "Once in a Lifetime," and "Gonna Build a Mountain." The show made Newley a huge star, even though he'd been kicking around since he was a kid and had made a name for himself as a pop singer and film performer.

Stop the World was followed by a show that looked like it would be another surefire hit, *Roar of the Greasepaint, Smell of the Crowd*, once again written by Newley and Bricusse, and directed by Newley. But, despite an engaging score, the original UK production never even made it to London. But David Merrick came to the rescue, brought it to the States and the show did a lengthy tour starring Newley and Cyril Ritchard, where it recouped most of Merrick's investment. It opened on Broadway and played 231 performances, having never reached the heights of *Stop the World*, either with critics or audiences. Still, any show that features such great songs as "Who Can I Turn To?" "A Wonderful Day Like Today," "The Joker," and "Feelin' Good" has to be deemed something of a hit.

From there, Newley did concerts, TV, and film.

In 1969, he made his very personal movie, *Can Hieronymus Merkin Ever Forget Mercy Humppe and Find True Happiness*, and it was so personal that no one wanted to see it. When the leading character, a performer/writer/director who happens to be just like Anthony Newley, stands on a mountaintop singing upwards towards heaven "I'm All I Need," well, audiences just weren't having any of it and the film came and went in a week, never to be shown again. It never appeared on a legitimate home video release, and if it had any TV showings they were few and far between. It remains almost a lost film. Newley would direct one other film, the barely released *Summertree*, starring Michael Douglas. From there, it was more concerts, as well as writing songs for the film version of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, which garnered an Oscar for Best Original Score.

While on tour doing concert dates, Newley and Bricusse began work on a new original musical entitled *It's a Funny Old World We Live In – But the World's Not Entirely to Blame*, a musical that Bricusse described as "a modest little saga about Man, Life, Death, God and The Devil, with the history of the world thrown in." The show was written during 1971, and it got as far as pre-production in New York at the end of that year. But then producer James Nederlander got cold feet and pulled out. Original *Stop the World* West End producer Bernard Delfont came to the rescue and the show, sporting a new title, *The Good Old Bad Old Days*, was slated for a short tour then a West End opening in December of 1972.

The simplicity of *Stop the World* and *Greasepaint* gave way to an extravagant production – a cast of eleven principals and a featured cast of twenty-two and a twenty-one piece orchestra, large and opulent settings and equally opulent costumes. Producer Delfont's original investment in *Stop the World* was 6,000 pounds. The new show was over 100,000 pounds.

At the time, Newley said, "This is not a religious musical. The story is of a meeting between The Devil (Bubba) and God (Gramps) at which God says he is fed up with Man. The Devil turns advocate for Man and says that humanity is more the victim than the criminal.

There are a lot of heavy questions raised during the piece in a very light comedy way, which we wouldn't even pretend to know the answers to. In fact, God and the Devil go off on holiday together at the end of the piece, leaving you to it. It's a pantomime, really, for grownups."

The show opened on December 20th, 1972 and the reviews were lukewarm – some were okay, and some, like the *Times*, were blistering: "To fortunate clowns, like Charlie Chaplin, it only occurs late in life that they have a message for the world. Anthony Newley contracted this delusion at an early date in *Stop the World* and in the ten years since his last appearance on the London stage, the malady has spread to the terminal state visible in this unspeakable new musical." However, Newley the performer was well received by almost all the reviewers. The show would hang on for nine months. There were a few recordings of some of the score's songs, but none really caught on like "What Kind of Fool Am I?" "Who Can I Turn To?" "Pure Imagination," or even "The Candy Man."

Being a Newley and Bricusse score, of course it abounds with catchy melodies and some genuinely good songs, even if they don't quite reach the heights of other Newley/Bricusse classics. Listening to the score forty years later, divorced from the show itself, the score is very pleasing to hear, and the performances are wonderful.

The Good Old Bad Old Days was released on LP on EMI in the UK. This is its first CD release.

— Bruce Kimmel