In the decades before the Second World War, popular musical theatre was one of the most influential forms of entertainment. This is the first book to reconstruct early popular musical theatre as a transnational and highly cosmopolitan industry that included everything from revues and operettas to dance halls and cabaret. Bringing together contributors from Britain and Germany, this collection moves beyond national theatre histories to study Anglo-German relations at a period of intense hostility and rivalry. Chapters frame the entertainment zones of London and Berlin against the wider trading routes of cultural transfer, where empire and transatlantic song and dance produced, perhaps for the first time, a genuinely international culture. Exploring adaptations and translations of works under the influence of political propaganda, this collection will be of interest both to musical theatre enthusiasts and to those interested in the wider history of modernism.

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We did not know it at the time, but this collection of essays began with a conference – ‘West End Musical Theatre, 1880–1930’ – hosted by Goldsmiths College, University of London in 2008. That event triggered a particularly lively discussion on the issue of cultural transfer and exchange between London and Berlin at the end of the last century. Six years on, the debate continues across a range of cultural forms and practices often associated with a last-century ‘modernity’ that still has much in common with contemporary worlds.

The public grant we subsequently obtained to study musical theatre in London/Berlin enabled us to pursue our research in more formal ways and with specific aims in mind. The next step was to create the opportunity for a number of seasoned academics to join forces with early-career researchers working on historical approaches to popular musical theatre, which we did through a second and much more focused conference, ‘West End and Friedrichstrasse: Cross-Cultural Exchange in Popular Musical Theatre’, hosted by the Freie Universität Berlin in March 2012. The present collection of essays is the outcome of that collaboration.

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Tobias Becker, David Linton and Len Platt

Minsmere
Note on the text

Musical plays in this book are alluded to by titles in English or German, depending on which productions are being referred to. Dates figure in parentheses where such mapping is helpful to a wider historical understanding. Similarly, titles of plays in German are translated where they help more general understanding.