

# Richard Jordan: Why three of my greatest nights at the theatre were tribute shows



To *Gillie With Love* at London's Gillian Lynne Theatre. Photo: David Jensen

Opinion

by Richard Jordan - Jul 11, 2019

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I've been to three one-night West End concerts that I will never forget, with each bringing together artists and audiences to celebrate the life of a talented individual, while raising money for good causes.

The first was in 1995: a concert titled *A Handful of Keys* at the Prince Edward Theatre to celebrate the much-missed musical actor Martin Smith, who tragically died from complications of Aids, aged 37.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, Smith was one of musical theatre's big names. If you want to truly appreciate how talented he was as a musical actor, then check out the original London cast recording of *City of Angels* in which he created the lead role of Stine.

The second, *Jack – A Life in Review*, was on a Friday afternoon in 1997 at the London Palladium and celebrated the life of Daily Mail theatre critic Jack Tinker. At the top of the programme's credits it read "With love from Cameron Mackintosh", who produced it.

Last Tuesday, I added a third to my list. *To Gillie With Love* was a concert to celebrate the life of fabled choreographer Gillian Lynne, who died last year. She was one of the first choreographers to move effortlessly between the worlds of dance and musical theatre with ground-breaking works such as *Cats* and *A Simple Man*.



## Obituary: Gillian Lynne – 'Cats and Phantom choreographer who staked a claim for the British musical on the world stage'

In a long and varied career as one of the leading choreographer-directors of her generation, Gillian Lynne, who has died at the ... [Continue reading](#)

Stars who had worked with her came out in force to celebrate this remarkable artist including Sergei Polunin, Liz Robertson, Beverley Knight, Peter Polycarpou, Hannah Waddingham, Caroline O'Connor, Jonjo O'Neill, Hugh Quarshie, Richard O'Brien, and Sierra Boggess.

It was a truly heartfelt celebration which fittingly took place at the West End in the theatre renamed in her honour last summer. The concert also officially launched the Lynne and Land Foundation, which will support hard-up students to complete their professional drama training.



Concerts like these can often provide some of the most visceral experiences to be had in the theatre. However, they are also events that leave little documentation about them after except perhaps a programme with the running order. Audiences feel privileged to have seen it and have the “I was there” feeling.

Such performances create an extraordinary and thrilling exchange between performer and spectator. The fourth wall is frequently broken through an outpouring of love for the individual celebrated, and everyone on the stage wants to do their absolute best.

The audience feels the power of live performance, knowing that this particular show will never be repeated. Meanwhile at such a celebration, audiences may also recall many happy memories they had spent in the theatre watching these shows – perhaps also with family and friends, some of whom may too may no longer be with them, and which in turn creates a whole other level of togetherness.

To Gillie With Love included past Phantoms Ramin Karmiloo and Ben Forster brought together to duet The Music of the Night. Emcees Wayne Sleep and Greg Castiglioni shared the stage to perform Cabaret’s iconic opening number, Willkommen.

Any such concert also usually afford the rare chance to see extracts recaptured on stage from productions you may have only heard about but were unable to see – possibly because you were too young. These can be show-stealing moments.

*‘Not only did the show illustrate the span and brilliance of her career, it also showed us an array of talent from established stars through to today’s exciting newcomers’*

To Gillie With Love was no exception. A glorious ensemble of West End musical theatre veterans that included Michael Howe, Celia Graham, Katy Elizabeth Trehearne, Ceili O’Connor, Julia Sutton and Myra Sands opened Act II with a barn-storming performance of Step to the Rear from the musical How Now Dow Jones. Many of those actors were already starring in the West End before most of the evening’s young ensemble of dancers were born.

It was the combination of all these performers assembled together for the evening that made last Tuesday’s concert, directed by Lynne’s long-time associate Christine Cartwright, so special. Not only did it illustrate the span and brilliance of her career, it also showed us an array of talent from established stars through to today’s exciting newcomers.

The show brilliantly underscored Lynne’s insistence that the ensemble should be front and centre throughout the evening. There was also no greater respect shown to them by the night’s stars than at the curtain call when the ensemble stood at the front throughout the bows with the stars behind them.

In his speech at the end of the evening, Peter Land, Gillian Lynne's husband, said: "Theatre is the art of togetherness." Whether that's onstage performing, working behind the scenes, or in the audience, it's an important point that we should always remember.

This brings me back to why these three particular concerts have afforded me some of my greatest theatre-going memories. While they all came out of the sadness of the passing of a theatre great, at such a night their influence and legacy feel more effervescent than ever.

This was true of To Gillie With Love whose legacy is carried forward through the work of Lynne's prodigies and collaborators including Matthew Bourne. The West End posters for Cats used to declare "Now and Forever". It would be a fitting tribute for Lynne herself.

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