

April 20, 2001. The Pet Shop Boys are at the RSC rehearsal rooms in Clapham. Downstairs they have just watched the cast of *Closer To Heaven* run through the musical's first half for the first time, and they are still excited. In the upstairs office, Jonathan Harvey is concentrating at a keyboard, writing a new scene, so they slip into the a small office with a sign on the door: "Wig Room". On a table is a model of the *Closer To Heaven* set with umbrellas hanging in the air and cutout black silhouette figures. Behind Neil Tennant's head is a poster, *Historic England*, offering a detailed royal family tree, and a still of Judy Garland at the beginning of the *Yellow Brick Road* just after she has arrived in Oz. Behind Chris Lowe are shelves of bald model heads. He browses through *Principles and Practice of Hairdressing* as Neil tells him he's going to do most of this interview. "I'm sick of me doing all the talking," Neil says. After a while Jonathan Harvey, the new scene obviously finished, makes faces through the window in the door, trying to put Chris off.

When did the two of you first discuss wanting to write a musical?

Chris: I don't know. It goes back a long way. A very long time ago. Our music has always had a theatrical quality to it. Our live shows have always been very theatrical. And we got a liking for the people that worked in the theatre – all the wig-makers and set-designers, and we started to meet directors and so on. And we thought: "This is an interesting world and we'd like to be more part of it." They seemed to make what seems impossible possible quite easily, and effortlessly. And there seemed to be a lot of integrity to what everyone was trying to achieve. It just gets boring, being in a pop group the whole time. It's good to do something different.

You spoke about it in public fairly early in your career - in early 1986, just after "West End girls" reached number one, Chris told *Smash Hits* that you wanted to write stage musicals.

Chris: Did I?

Neil: It was Chris who said it, let's note. It's not just me. It's funny, because in rock music or pop music, it's sort of a cliché: pop stars saying "then there's the musical we've promised ourselves..." It's a famous line from *Spinal Tap*. Chris: "That musical we've always promised ourselves". Which I think would be a great title for the musical. Neil: We've certainly been talking seriously about writing a musical for over ten years. I remember once having a discussion with Derek Jarman, who directed our first tour in 1989, about writing a musical. In the programme for our *Performance* tour it says that the next thing we're planning to do is a musical, and that was 1991.

Chris: They do take a lot time to bring to fruition.

Neil: In 1992, the BBC Drama department asked us if we were interested in writing a musical for BBC TV and they suggested Jonathan Harvey could be a playwright for us to work with. This was when his play *Beautiful Thing* was on in London, so we went to see that and really liked it, but that didn't come to anything. We'd had the idea of buying the rights to a particular book and

making it into a musical but we couldn't get the rights to it so we decided to write something from scratch. By then we'd been to see another of Jonathan's plays, Boom Bang-a-Bang, about a load of people watching the Eurovision Song Contest...

Chris: ...which was really good...

Neil: ...so we thought we'd ask him if he was interested. We finally had dinner with him and got on like a house on fire. The following year, 1996, the three of us sat down in this house called Childown we'd rented in Surrey and started to work on it.

Neil: Chris had an idea.

Chris: We wanted it to be set in the world of clubbing. Neil: We thought about what musical areas there were where you can set a musical. One thing I like about Cabaret is that it's a performance in a club and all of her songs are on stage, in the film, so you get over the whole cue-for-a-song thing. We decided to choose a musical environment that would lend itself to contemporary music, and so it was obvious it would be set in a nightclub. We were looking at things we know about, and we know about nightclubs.

Chris: It's a world that we've observed at close hand.

Neil: We also wanted to put in something about the music business, because we knew it. When we started writing the play, in the mid-Nineties, there were lots of other boy bands emerging in the wake of Take That, and Chris and I had always been fascinated by this manipulated pop, and we thought that would be a good subplot. However we decided we didn't want to have a boy band on stage. We didn't want it to be a musical about a boy band, Chris: And then we thought that it's always good when someone has confusing sexuality. Although in one of the earlier drafts of the play one of the criticisms of it was that everyone in it was bisexual.

Neil: There's a weird democracy in nightclubs. Or, rather, there's a different hierarchy than in the real world. And I've always been interested by how people are at night, compared to how they are during the day.

Chris: The whole play is set at night, apart from one scene near the end. We also liked that when you're in a club, what you are outside the club doesn't necessarily bear any relation to what you are when you're in the club.

Neil: We suggested having video screens because we'd liked the way they were used in our shows at the Savoy Theatre and also being surveillance is such a fact of contemporary life. Also, in the Nineties, Britain became an incredible drug culture in a way it hadn't been in the Sixties – and actually I don't think it was like that even in the Sixties. It became a kind of mass market drug culture. And we thought, "Why isn't this on the stage?" There's this amazing cultural phenomenon, after the rave phenomenon started, where millions of people go clubbing, take ecstasy, and get off their heads. If you listen to the radio these days you feel like it's almost sanctioned by the BBC. But you don't often see it in the theatre. And we wanted to write about what it does to people when they live their lives at night totally and do drugs all the time. And you see people around you who live like that in London and whose lives do get more or less destroyed. The musical has a schizophrenic view of club culture. It has the point of view that it's fabulous, but it also has the point of view that it's an appalling nightmare and destroys people's lives. . It's not quite a morality tale, but it has elements

How did you decide what it would be about?

of that. But then it may also revert to the fact that it's relentless, and relentlessly fabulous, and the music is great, and it's all there for a reason. It's a kind of community, and that people are going to go on doing it. People have to escape from their lives and this is one way how. It's up to you to decide about the human cost.

Had you both been big fans of musical theatre?

Neil: I had. When I was a child I used to go to the Theatre Royal in Newcastle where they'd get touring productions before or after the West End, so when I was a child I saw My Fair Lady and Camelot, and also some amateur productions. I used to go on Saturday afternoons and queue up for the cheap seats in the gods. I remember seeing My Fair Lady when I was about 11 and I thought it was a fantastic show. I also saw film musicals

Chris: I don't think I went to see any musicals in the flesh, but I saw films. I enjoyed The Sound Of Music and I still enjoy The Sound Of Music, but I saw some terrible ones like Half A Sixpence.

Neil: When I was much younger my mother's father was the first person I knew who had a stereogram and to him the ultimate high fidelity recordings were the film soundtracks of all the Rogers and Hammerstein musicals, so we'd go over there on Sundays and he'd be playing Oklahoma! and South Pacific and saying how fantastically it was recorded. That made a big impression on me. Then, when I was 11, I joined the People's Youth Theatre – The People's Theatre is the big amateur theatre in Newcastle which owns a former cinema, and they have a young people's group. I went from 11 to 18, and I was a terrible actor, but eventually I wrote a play. It was called The Baby. It was about a boy and a girl having a relationship and it falling apart and then the girl discovers she's pregnant, and the boy thinks this'll save the relationship, but it doesn't. It had three or four songs in it which I wrote, though I didn't appear in it. But I'd always wanted to write musical theatre. When I was nine years old I wrote a musical with a girl at primary school. It was called The Girl Who Pulled Tails, a cautionary tale about a girl who went around pulling the tails' of cats and how she got into trouble. The showstopper was called "Has Anybody Seen My Cat?": "Has anybody seen my cat – the one with the long tail?" We performed it in her back garden one afternoon and we got very angry because people didn't pay attention. Did you stay interested in musicals as you got older?

Neil: When I first came to London in the early Seventies, I'd see films. Cabaret, to me, is the most perfect musical film ever made. And then in the Eighties I got interested in Stephen Sondheim musicals.

Chris: I went to see Evita in the late Seventies and loved it. It might have been when I came down for job interviews, for my year out working in an architect's office. I queued up for returns by myself. I don't know why I did, but I liked it. I liked the music and the staging of it. It was quite abstract and minimal, and it seemed fresh and exciting and dynamic. That was probably the first proper musical I'd seen.

When you first talked about writing a musical, what was your idea of how a musical written by the Pet Shop Boys should be?

Chris: What we wanted was a musical with lots of good contemporary songs in it. A play about contemporary life with contemporary music that was not long and boring.

Neil: At one time, in the Forties and Fifties, musicals were the source of pop songs and we wanted to see if you could go back to the way it used to be, where musical theatre has contemporary music you could also hear on the radio. That's something we've

thought about almost as long as we've been going in the Pet Shop Boys. There are many people who think it is not possible to tell a narrative in pop music, because the dynamics of pop music, which is rhythm-based, don't allow for the subtleties necessary in telling a story. And actually in a lot of rock musicals there's a certain amount of truth in that as well.

How easy did you find it to come up with the story between the three of you?

Neil: We all sat round in the sitting room at Chiswick, talking, and we started to sketch out this idea.

Chris: Talking about the plot, and what songs were needed and how the songs would work.

Neil: One day we drove into Woking and got all the musicals we could get. We sat round for two afternoons watching *The Sound Of Music*, *Oliver!* and *Annie and Carousel*.

Chris: Not a good idea, actually, watching all these in a row.

Neil: We watched them all just to see how the music was used and what it does, how they go into the music from speech. We sat round talking, and finally we came up with a plot and a selection of characters and then Chris and I would go down to the studio and start writing music and Jonathan started writing the script. For instance, we had the character Saunders, the pop manager, early on and we had the idea for the song "Call Me Old-Fashioned" to establish who the manager was, so that was one of the first ones we wrote. Another early song was "In Denial", for which Chris already had the music. The musical at that point was called *Nightlife*, which was Jonathan's title, and we wrote a song to go at the end of the show called "Nightlife". A lot of the songs from our album *Nightlife* were originally going to be in the musical: "For your own good" was going to be the opening number, and "The only one" was a song one boy sang about another. Sometimes Jonathan suggested to us ideas for songs; sometimes we suggested scenes to Jonathan.

Did you find yourself writing songs differently when you were writing them for the musical?

Chris: We did towards the end, because the closer we got to finishing the more we realised how important it is that there are no extraneous meaningless bits. Even though it's a song, the lyrics are dialogue. The lyrics had to be changed on many songs, and the new songs had to be really specific lyrically.

Neil: We threw songs out as we went. In the beginning we'd shoved songs in which we already had.

Chris: You realise it doesn't work like that.

Neil: Our song "You only tell me you love me when you're drunk" was in the musical, and Jonathan was having to write a whole scene just to be able to go into it. We had a long meeting with Trevor Nunn at the National Theatre who read the second draft and listened to the songs, and gave us a tutorial for an hour and a half about what he thought was wrong with it, which was really generous. We really got the point that there mustn't be a sense that the drama stops, somebody sings a song, and the drama carries on, and that's an issue we've addressed ever since.

Do you think this experience will change what the Pet Shop Boys do as a pop group?

Chris: I think maybe it'll have the reverse effect, and there'll be a greater distinction between us as the writers of musicals and as rock stars, or whatever we are. We're diverging. Our next album is quite the opposite of this.

Neil: There's nothing camp about our next album.

Chris: We've both got two hats now.

Neil: Which is just as well as we don't have a lot of hair. Is it strange being involved in something where you're not on stage?

Chris: No, it's great. It's great being behind the scenes.

Neil: That was another reason to do it. One of the interesting things about this process is that it's an absolute collaboration whereas in pop music we have absolute control over everything we do. This isn't "The Pet Shop Boys musical", it's "by Jonathan Harvey and the Pet Shop Boys, directed by Gemma Bodinetz, produced by the Really Useful Group, starring all the actors and dancers..."

Chris: [Laughs] You'd be surprised how much input all the actors have. There's a lot of input coming from everyone.

Neil: It's great not being the focus, and watching it happen. And I find it interesting hearing other people sing our songs. When we write a song and I sing it, that's it, really.

Chris: It's great hearing other interpretations.

Neil: Also the music has a different context. In a musical the music can be a kind of shorthand that gets to the emotional heart of a situation very quickly. I remember years ago we went to a Variety Club lunch for Liza Minnelli and Vanessa Redgrave gave a speech about Liza. She said that when she was a child her father Michael Redgrave used to play songs on the piano and she noticed that all the songs she liked best had a picture of this woman on the cover of the sheet music, Judy Garland, and they were all from films. And she asked her father, "Why are they singing in these films?" And he said, "Sometimes someone feels something so strongly, to speak isn't enough and so they have to start singing."

Chris: It's such a good explanation for it.

Neil: This had quite a big effect on us. Both of us had tears in our ears. I think that became one of the reasons why we wanted to write a musical.