

## *Sunset Boulevard* in Spanish Performance: Translations on the Musical Stage

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**Abstract:**

This article focuses on Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Sunset Boulevard* (1993), in order to present some relevant aspects of the production and reception of musicals both in an original and a target context. The study will first describe the eventful creative process of this musical text in its Anglophone source contexts, and will then move on to examine it from the perspective of its performance in Spanish translation. Recently translated for a Spanish-language production staged in Tenerife in 2017 (soon followed by another one in Argentina in 2018), *Sunset Boulevard* is a good example of the powerful impact that the importation of Anglo-American musicals has had in Spain in recent decades (see Mateo 2008) while it also serves to illustrate interesting aspects of the evolution and current situation of musicals' production in this country. This macro-level study will therefore examine Lloyd Webber's musical performed in sung translation, addressing it from a contextual standpoint and with a focus in Spain, with the aim of contributing to a deeper knowledge of theatre translation when it involves musical plays.

**Keywords:** *Sunset Boulevard*; stage musicals; theatre translation; performance; Spanish-language productions

## 1. Introduction

Spain offers an ideal context for the examination of Anglophone musicals in performance, having become, over the last three decades, a large recipient of shows originating in the West End or Broadway, which have in turn “foster[ed] the autochthonous production of a genre apparently foreign to the country’s musical tradition,” as I stated in an article devoted to the successful importation of Anglo-American musicals into Spanish theatres (Mateo 2008, 319). It also provides interesting material for the study of theatre and music translation, since those musicals from London and New York are performed in Spain in translated form, which makes this genre a significant exception in the world of music, as “[t]ranslation provision varies across the spectrum of live music events, but is usually poor,” in many musical contexts being indeed “generally, and sadly, non-existent” (Desblache 2019, 227). The fact that stage musicals are usually exported in the language of the new audiences –as is practically always the case in Spain– highlights the theatrical component of the genre, linking it to plays rather than to opera in terms of translation practice, as the former are usually also performed in the audience’s vernacular whereas the latter is generally made comprehensible with the aid of surtitling –while the singing heard on stage takes place in the original language of the libretto, normally a foreign one for Spanish opera audiences.

The translation of musicals –both in terms of the modality chosen and of translation strategies– is affected by a series of factors, such as the complex semiotic nature of the text, its dual texture –combining spoken dialogue and musical numbers–, audiences’ traditions and expectations regarding performance reception (for instance, as to which language they expect to hear onstage), and other artistic, historical, cultural, and economic aspects having to do with the production of the shows. Some of these elements pertain to theatre translation and/or to music translation in general; other factors are specific to the genre in question and they were examined in the above-mentioned article (Mateo 2008), which addressed musical theatre translation from a macro-level approach, focusing on Anglophone musicals as source texts and Spain as a target context.

A reasonable lapse of time has passed since that study was published, for us to observe how the situation has evolved. We will do so by paying attention to the musical *Sunset Boulevard* (1993), recently translated for performance in Spanish, so it will serve to illustrate the evolution and current situation of translated musicals’ production and reception in Spain. Like that earlier study, therefore, this article will not present a micro-level analysis of the source and target texts of Lloyd-Webber’s piece but a contextual examination: after describing the –far

from smooth– creative process of this musical text in its English-language source contexts, the article will centre on its production in Spanish sung translation –with the show seen in Spain in 2017 as its primary focus but also considering an Argentinian version staged soon after, in order to give a broader picture of Spanish-language productions while hopefully contributing to a deeper knowledge of theatre translation when it involves musical plays.

## 2. *Sunset Boulevard* in its Source Contexts

Based on Billy Wilder’s film with the same title (1950), and composed by Andrew Lloyd Webber with libretto and lyrics by Don Black and Christopher Hampton, the stage musical *Sunset Boulevard* (1993) is a good example of how musicals are often the product of interesting journeys across artistic genres, cultures and languages. The text started as a film noir movie in the United States and, after a long thinking and consultation process,<sup>1</sup> Andrew Lloyd Webber finally managed to get the rights, the time and his ideal librettists to produce a musical for the stage inspired by Wilder’s film, which had its official world premiere at the Adelphi Theatre in London in July 1993,<sup>2</sup> only six months before it went onstage in the United States –for which the British composer untypically chose Los Angeles, staging it at the Shubert Theatre in December that year. The reason for this choice was, according to the British composer himself, “that the story was a Hollywood one and also that his experiences of Los Angeles productions had always been favourable” (Perry 1993, 96). After the success in California, the show finally opened in Broadway, at the Minskoff Theater, in December 1994.

*Sunset Boulevard* tells the story of Norma Desmond, the silent film star who has not accepted the arrival of talking pictures, nor the passage of her stardom days, and leads a secluded life in her mansion in Hollywood’s Sunset Boulevard when a cinema scriptwriter in the decline, rather keen on material things, chances upon her, prompting her to dream of her longed-for comeback; the strange self-interested romance ensuing between them, however, evolves into an obsessive and unhealthy relationship which ends tragically. The story travelled from the

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1 The composer revealed he spent twelve years thinking about this adaptation, ever since he saw Wilder’s film in the early 1970s. The movie actually inspired a tune, fragments of which Lloyd Webber would use for Stephen Frears’ black comedy film *Gumshoe*; he would eventually give the whole tune a new style and form to create the title song of *Sunset Boulevard* (Perry 1993, 8-9).

2 The musical had actually been performed for the first time at Lloyd Webber’s Sydmonon Festival in 1992.

cinema to the stage;<sup>3</sup> from the original film's spoken text to the hybridity of dialogue and musical numbers; from the United States to London and back to North America; and from those two countries and their common language to Spanish-language contexts, in which each genre –film and musical play– was received with a different title, as will be discussed later.

“Sex, murder, glamor, madness and the Faustian price of fame: *Sunset Boulevard* offers rich potential for dramatists,” as a reviewer of one of the latest productions put it (Dalton 2016). In fact, there were several failed attempts before Lloyd Webber's to turn Wilder's film into a musical, the most important of which was by Gloria Swanson, the actress playing Norma Desmond in the movie, who worked on an adaptation with the actor Richard Stapley and the musician Dickson Hughes in the 1950s but had to shelve the project when Paramount eventually and abruptly denied their permission. Paramount's decision, in any case, can probably be regarded “aesthetically correct,” in Perry's opinion, since, with the happy ending and other changes introduced in Swanson's version, “the ironic effect of Wilder's film would have been totally lost in the adaptation, which seemed to have been made with the intention of creating an anodyne entertainment as well as a vehicle for a distinguished and ageing star” (Perry 1993, 82 & 78).

Lloyd Webber, Black and Hampton's adaptation, on the other hand, was particularly close to the film, both regarding the dialogue –keeping some famous lines from the original– and the stage sets, even incorporating some footage from the film. An important aspect from the movie script that was retained in the musical was the flashback narration by the scriptwriter, Joe Gillis, whose dead body appears floating in the pool of Norma's mansion at the beginning of both film and musical, after which his voice starts recalling the whole story. In their composition of the libretto, for which they successfully worked together “on both the book and the lyrics” (Lloyd Webber in Perry 1993, 9), Black and Hampton agreed that “it would not be a show punctuated with elaborate production numbers,” but that “[e]ach song would have to arise organically from the plot, with its logic carefully delineated” (Perry 1993, 85). The close adherence to the original script meant that this musical contained much more dialogue than other musicals by Lloyd Webber, with around 20% of the lines spoken instead of sung (Perry 1993, 86). Great attention was paid to characterization, making sure that “the words would belong to the person singing them [and] be right

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3 It may actually make the journey back to the cinema in the form of a musical film which Glenn Close revealed was in preproduction just before the COVID-19 pandemic. The new movie was being produced by Close herself, who would also play Norma in it, and it was going to be directed by Rob Ashford while Tom MacRae would be in charge of the screenplay adaptation (Sullivan 2020).

for the character” (Black, in Perry 1993, 86). Both the librettists and Lloyd Webber showed deep awareness of what the presence of music can do, how it marks an important difference between musical and spoken genres: in terms of pace, for instance, “when a song is used to make a plot point it will usually take rather longer to get it across than a spoken line can in a play”; and in terms of characterization, “[i]t is possible to make Norma a great deal more sympathetic. Music can do that for you, it can make you get underneath her soul” (Hampton and Lloyd Webber, respectively, in Perry 1993, 86 & 87).

Nevertheless, and despite the fact that Billy Wilder seems to have been pleased with the result –having attended the 1993 premiere in London’s West End, reviews of the musical adaptation have been mixed from the start. While, for instance, the Australian composer Malcolm Williamson (albeit usually critical of Lloyd Webber’s work) found this piece “technically marvellous,” with “spiritual and philosophical depth,” describing its music as “immortal” (in Perry 1993, 107), theatre reviewers have expressed their reservations or even harsh criticism, as this review of the musical’s revival in 2016 –featuring Glenn Close and the English National Opera in London’s Coliseum– shows: “The book, by Christopher Hampton and Don Black, leaves no Hollywood Babylon cliché unturned with its off-the-shelf gallery of back-stabbing agents, goonish heavies, wholesome young beauties and ruthless studio chiefs. Oddly, all of this actually feels more dated than Wilder’s film, which was written 50 years before, but contained far more nuance and irony. A more adventurous creative team might have found a way to tease out a little more moral ambiguity and contemporary subtext” (Dalton 2016).

Film and musical can be said to ‘talk’ to each other in the latter text; similarly, a dialogue was somehow also established between the different English-language productions:<sup>4</sup> in 1994, the London show incorporated changes that were made for the production in LA –where reviews were much more favourable– both affecting the libretto and the music score (Gans 2016); apart from that, while the original London production had had Patty Lepone as Norma Desmond, the 2016 ENO revival (which followed another one in 2008) had the famous role played by Glenn Close, who had been the first (musical) American Norma, in Los Angeles as well as in Broadway; and the New York production would in turn see the Normas of Betty Buckley and Elaine Page, who had both given widely acclaimed performances of the role in London.

It must be said that both American productions were the object of lawsuits, respectively brought by Faye Dunaway (in Los Angeles) and Patty Lepone (in

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4 A list of all Anglophone productions, with their creative teams and casts, can be found in Wikipedia. “Sunset Boulevard (musical)”, last accessed on November 9, 2021.

Broadway), the latter for having been replaced by Glenn Close in the New York show, after Lloyd Webber decided to move Close to Broadway when he saw her tremendous success in California. Both lawsuits were settled with monetary compensation, adding to the big losses of this stage musical –also caused by its high production costs, which turned it into a financial flop despite the very favourable reception by the public.<sup>5</sup>

These details of the original(s) *Sunset Boulevard* are relevant –in various ways and degrees– to the study of its performance in translation. Other aspects, such as the cultural load in the text, intertextuality, the significant choice of performers for the main roles –in both the source and the target context–, or the complex and costly process of producing a musical, among other factors, will be discussed in the next section, when we examine the musical’s production in Spanish.

### 3. *Sunset Boulevard* in Spanish Translation for the Musical Stage

#### 3.1. *Spanish Versions of the Musical*

*Sunset Boulevard* has been performed in various countries beyond Britain and the US, and in languages other than English. The first non-English version came soon, with a production in Germany in 1995. The musical would have to wait a much longer time for a Spanish translation, which finally took form in two different versions for two recent productions: one in Spain in 2017 and another one in Argentina in 2018.

The show in Spain was an initiative by Tenerife’s regional government, which sponsored the translation and production of the musical in its Auditorio, under an agreement with Andrew Lloyd Webber’s company The Really Useful Group Ltd; *Sunset Boulevard* was in fact the third piece by Lloyd Webber produced by the Auditorio de Tenerife under this agreement, after *Jesucristo Superstar* (*Jesus Christ Superstar*) in 2014 and *Evita* in 2015. The same actress who had played the iconic title role in the latter musical was chosen to bring to life the Spanish Norma Desmond: the singer Paloma San Basilio, already well known for her performances in other important musicals in Spain, like *Evita* (1981), *El hombre de la Mancha* (*Man of La Mancha*) (1997) and *My Fair Lady* (2001) (see Mateo 2008, 322-325, 334). An acclaimed musical performer from Argentina, Gerónimo Rauch, was cast for the leading male role, Joe Gillis; while the orchestra was conducted by another Argentinian, Julio Awad, with long experience in musicals in Spain –having led *La Bella y la Bestia* (*Beauty and the Beast*), *My Fair Lady*, *Los*

<sup>5</sup> See Allen (2020), and Wikipedia. “Sunset Boulevard (musical)”, last accessed on November 9, 2021.

*Productores* (*The Producers*), *El fantasma de la ópera* (*The Phantom of the Opera*), *Víctor o Victoria* (*Victor/Victoria*) and *Jesucristo Superstar*. Both the stage direction and the translation were by Jaime Azpilicueta, who has played an unquestionable leading role in the importation of Anglo-American musicals into Spain (see Mateo 2008, 321-329). With “exaggerated expectancy” (Padrón 2017b –my translation), then, the first Spanish version went on stage in December 2017 with a fixed number of performances –just eight, running until January 2018.<sup>6</sup>

The show also generated considerable interest in Latin America, where Paloma San Basilio enjoys great fame and prestige thanks to her singing career (Nieto 2017). However, it was a different production and translation that was premiered there: an Argentinian version produced by Lino Patalano and Gustavo Yankelevich, which opened at the Teatro Maipo in Buenos Aires a few months after the Tenerife show, in April 2018, and ran for four months. The leading roles were played by the singer and actress Valeria Lynch and the actor Mariano Chiesa; the performance was directed by Claudio Tolcachir, who, with no experience in musicals, achieved a great success with this one –being praised by Lynch for his great skill in assembling a musical’s three disciplines (song, dance and acting) (Ladrón de Guevara 2018); the conductor was Gerardo Gardelín and the translation was done by Fernando Masllorens and Federico González del Pino –working on the book together– and Elio Marchi –who took care of the “adaptation” (to use the term featuring in the show’s information) of the musical numbers. The production was welcomed as a “great premiere” and the reviews described it as “excellent” and “sublime” (Irazábal 2018 –my translation), so it came as no surprise when it received four 2018 ACE Awards: for the two main performers, the conductor and the stage director. Although the focus of attention in this article is Spain’s version and context, the Argentinian production will also be considered in the analysis, both as a point of comparison and to present a more comprehensive picture of stage musicals when they are produced in a target context. Having two different target texts in the same language, practically concurrent, is useful not just for comparing translation strategies but also –as will be the object of this study– to show how factors pertaining to the specific target context have a bearing on the whole translation and production process, affecting the final product which reaches the new audiences through the performance.

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6 Several reviews and articles mention a possible tour of the show around Spain, which would finish in Madrid (see Padrón 2017a; and Nieto 2017), but I have not been able to trace any information on this, which prompts me to think the tour never took place.

### 3.2. *Sunset Boulevard* as an Example of Spain's Successful Importation of Anglophone Musicals

In Mateo (2008), a series of factors were examined which played a role in the selection of musical source texts for performance in Spain, as a key to understanding the (then fairly recent) success of a genre which could be considered as foreign to the country's musical or theatrical tradition. These factors were not just textual but extratextual: source culture and language, 'social relevance,' 'productive reception,' commercial aspects, source text features and economic factors (Mateo 2008, 329-337); and they helped to explain the positive impact that the importation of (mostly Anglo-American) musicals had on the Spanish theatre system, popularizing and establishing the genre –indeed gradually fostering the production of autochthonous works in the country (Mateo 2008, 319, 337-339). *Sunset Boulevard* will now provide us with a lens through which to examine that impact, reviewing those factors from today's perspective, while it may also serve to illustrate the role assigned to, and the form taken by, translation in the process.

As regards *source language and culture*, *Sunset Boulevard* is a fine example of the outstanding contribution of musicals originally written in English, from London and New York, as the major providers of texts for performance in Spanish translation,<sup>7</sup> so much so that they may actually be said to be “the new bearers of Anglo-American culture, having now joined the film industry in carrying this culture into Spain” (Mateo 2008, 330). This is scarcely surprising, given the hegemony of the English language and of (mainly) American culture in the world since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, as *Sunset Boulevard* also illustrates, many of the musicals imported derive from films, which made it easier for originally Anglophone shows to reach Spanish theatres since audiences would already be familiar with many of the stories (and their cultural context) –given the strong presence of Hollywood productions in the country's (and the world's) cinemas.

The connection with the original film is particularly interesting in the case of *Sunset Boulevard* in terms of translation. Following a trend which is increasingly common in films (see Mateo 2008, 325), its title was transferred in English into both the Argentinian and Spain's musical theatre versions as *Sunset Boulevard*; this can often be seen in musicals imported from Britain or the US today, due to copyright as well as to commercial reasons –the English title being used as a strategy to attract the new audiences, by linking the target-language show to the original productions from Broadway or the West End, which enjoy considerable

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7 See the section “The reception of Anglo-American musicals in Spain: a historical overview” in Mateo (2008, 321-329) and a review of more recent theatre seasons in Mateo (2022 – forthcoming).

prestige in the Hispanic target contexts. This is important as regards reception and intertextuality, since Billy Wilder's film –which the original musical's title readily brings to mind– had variously been titled in the Spanish-speaking world as *El crepúsculo de los dioses* (in Spain) and *Ocaso de una estrella* or *El ocaso de una vida* (with both titles used in Argentina, the latter being preferred across Latin America); this meant that musical theatre audiences in these target contexts did not immediately make the connection between the musical and the movie it was based on –a dissociation which is not unusual, however, in the world of translation.<sup>8</sup>

The title issue is clearly also related to another of the factors contributing to the impact of Anglophone musicals in Spain: *source text features*. Although some of these shows rely on their popular music for their acceptance and success in the target context –e.g., *Mamma Mia*, *Fame*, *Grease*, *We Will Rock You*, etc., “an important feature in all successful musical productions is what might be broadly termed their ‘universal’ nature in cultural terms. [...] the scripts frequently deal with cross-cultural and even timeless issues” (Mateo 2008, 334). The latter is also true of *Sunset Boulevard*, whose title connects the musical –in the source-language productions and in the translations into Spanish– to the original film, and its indebtedness to Wilder's work is acknowledged in most of the articles presenting or reviewing the Spanish-language productions.<sup>9</sup> This enhances the shows' relationship to a movie widely regarded as a classic which, despite featuring a highly culture-specific plot and context, deals with timeless universal problems.

Title, plot and context are, indeed, closely connected to Hollywood in both the film and the musical: the name *Sunset Boulevard* conjures up the world's cinema capital, also denoting a road that “epitomizes the aspirant spirit of America,” as “[t]he history of Los Angeles in the last 100 years is written on [it]” (Perry 1993, 13 & 15). With the advent of the movie industry, many studios established themselves on this road or near it and it was from here that films gradually became “the sensation of the twentieth century” and that stardom can be said to have been born (Perry 1993, 20 & 21). Like many others from the cinema world, Billy Wilder and Gloria Swanson had an apartment and a mansion, respectively, on this road. The plot relates to the arrival of the ‘talkies,’ which not only caused a revolution in the film industry and in the experience of cinema, but also brought unexpected and undesirable changes to the actors of silent cinema, some of whom had become idols and “failed to make the transition” (Perry 1993, 34 –see pp. 33-35 for a good account of this). The film script and the musical libretto are therefore

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8 See Mateo (2000) for another example of this: Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*, which reached Spanish stages as *Las brujas de Salem*, while the 1996 film version was received in Spain with the more literal translation of the original title, *El crisol*.

9 See, among many others: Toda La Música (2017) or Irazábal (2018).

full of cultural references, enhancing their verisimilitude: to authentic film studios and movies of the time, to real silent-cinema stars and other well-known people, to actual places (a famous pharmacy, popular buildings, etc.) (Perry 1993, 70), and to the film noir style – “[a] distinctive 1940s genre identifying a mood of pessimism, foreboding, anxiety and tension, [with often] an unwholesome sexual liaison at its centre” (Perry 1993, 72), features which can clearly be identified in both the cinema and the musical versions of *Sunset Boulevard*.

Despite the cultural load and specificity of title, plot and context, the story in *Sunset Boulevard* touches on universal themes, as has already been mentioned and a reviewer of the Argentinian version highlighted: “It hardly matters, in a more existential sense, whether it is about a Hollywood diva or a lowly driver from Buenos Aires. What the text suggests is how difficult it is to remain in the limelight when, inevitably, time threatens to leave us behind. [...] To adapt or not to adapt, that is the question” (Irazábal 2018 –my translation). Similarly, the veteran Spanish actor José Sacristán –who took the leading role in the Spanish version of Dale Wasserman’s *Man of la Mancha* (1965), *El hombre de la Mancha*, a 1997 show by producer and director Luis Ramírez after which “[e]verything seemed to change on the Spanish musical scene” (Mateo 2008, 323)– referred to the combination of the universal and the local in order to explain the success of this iconic show: “its success lies in the fact that the musical’s subject feels completely familiar and that ‘although their worries are universal, the main characters seem clearly Spanish; we identify with them’” (in Rodríguez del Álamo 1998 –my translation). In the case of *Sunset Boulevard*, the identification lies in the familiarity with Hollywood and the cinema world, so close to today’s audiences culturally speaking. We can here recall Desblache’s claim in her recent comprehensive study on music and translation (2019, 24): “Music today makes it possible to have it both ways: global and local, cosmopolitan and national, universal and specific.” Musicals, which have notched up considerable success beyond their original borders, certainly confirm this and *Sunset Boulevard* exemplifies it well.

The musical’s origin in Billy Wilder’s film is connected to another factor quoted in Mateo (2008) as determining the successful importation of English-language musicals into Spain: *commercial aspects*, one of which was the relationship a musical may have with a cinema classic or hit (2008, 333). As has been mentioned, Wilder’s film features in practically all reviews and articles presenting the translated versions of Lloyd-Webber’s musical play, probably not just as a fair acknowledgement of its debt but also as a means to attract the new audiences to this piece deriving from “one of the most iconic works in the history of cinema” (Padrón 2017b –my translation).

“Commercial quality [...] is another important factor in the initial selection of source musicals and in the translation and production process” (Mateo 2008,

333). In this regard, stage musicals follow a trend in the translation of musical texts in general since, as Lucile Desblache points out (2019, 84), “[i]n music, more so than in any other form of audiovisual product, commercial success dictates not only the mode of translation, but also whether the product is translated at all.” Indeed, like many other musicals before it, *Sunset Boulevard* is presented as another successful Broadway or West End piece, while the fact that the composer and original producer is Andrew Lloyd-Webber constitutes an added value and a guarantee of success in Spain too. Interestingly, this contrasts with the mixed reviews received by the original production in both Anglophone contexts (as mentioned in section 2 above) –the composer-producer having actually been the object of some harsh criticism in Broadway, where his productions represent “[t]he so called ‘invasion’ of the British musical [and] the arrival of the megamusical” (Frankel 2000, xi), which had started in the 1980s and many dislike so much. British shows have sometimes been described there as “somber, longer, without air” (Frankel 2000, xii) while, in a recent article which also refers to “[t]he age of Andrew Lloyd Webber” disapprovingly, *Sunset Boulevard* is said to show “many of [the] key players [of the epic process of creating a musical] at its worst” (Allen December 5-6, 2020). In London, the above-mentioned reviewer of the new 2016 ENO production writes: “The veteran composer is often unfairly derided by critics, but even by his standards, this show feels weighed down with syrupy bombast and flat-footed motifs” (Dalton 2016).

Nevertheless, at the time of the 2017 revival of the production at New York’s Palace Theatre, Lloyd-Webber had “the rare distinction of having four musicals running simultaneously on Broadway: *The Phantom of the Opera*, *School of Rock–The Musical*, *Cats*, and *Sunset Boulevard*” (Gans 2017), which can be put down to a skill in writing in popular styles that the composer has shown from his earliest musicals and in box-office hits like *Cats* and *Phantom of the Opera* (Laird 2011, 39). The impact of the British composer-producer in the theatre musical genre is unquestionable not just in Britain and the US but in non-English speaking countries. His early show *Jesus Christ Superstar* was the very first great production in Spain, being staged in Madrid as *Jesucristo Superstar* in 1975, only three years after the original had opened in London. The Spanish *Evita* followed soon (1981), notching up another success, and the new century would bring *El fantasma de la ópera* (2002) and *Cats* (2003) to Spanish stages (Mateo 2008, 321-326). So, it is no wonder that any new musical with Lloyd Webber’s signature should be received with great expectation. As it happens and has already been mentioned, reviews in Spanish-language contexts register much more positive opinions of the musical; the following in Argentina will serve as an example: “It is often said that *Sunset Boulevard* is one of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s most complex pieces, an icon of contemporary musical theatre. Indeed, those who visit the Teatro Maipo to see this musical will

undoubtedly witness all the reasons for such a statement” (Irazábal 2018 –my translation). The reception of a translation is governed by norms and expectations operating in its own context, and it can therefore be very different from that of the source text. Receptors and contexts become all too important in the whole process: Translation audiences/readers develop their own expectations towards a new target text or performance from previous experiences with a particular source author, genre or translator, from their own ideology and traditions, etc.; these expectations end up establishing some norms or conventions which determine, for instance, what translations should be like and whether they are acceptable at all (see, e.g., Chesterman’s concept of ‘expectancy norms’ –1997, 64).<sup>10</sup>

A common and effective commercial strategy for musicals’ production in both source and target contexts is the hiring of famous artists (Mateo 2008, 334), who are not necessarily always experienced musical theatre performers but well-known singers or cinema/theatre actors. The roles of the main characters in *Sunset Boulevard* are so complex and crucial to the story that miscasting them would no doubt be fatal to the production. The first actress to incarnate Norma Desmond, Gloria Swanson, gave “a near-perfect rendering of her screen character, with every movement, every vocal inflection precisely calculated. It was a revelation that a great silent-screen actress could speak her lines so appropriately” (Perry 1993, 60). And producers of the theatre musical version have proved how special the role of Norma is by casting experienced and celebrated actresses like Patty Lepone, Elaine Page, Glenn Close, Betty Buckley, Rita Moreno or Petula Clark in the source contexts and, in Spanish-language productions, performers like Valeria Lynch and Paloma San Basilio –both of whom had already made a distinguished singing career before taking to the stage to perform iconic musical theatre roles, among them the protagonist in Lloyd-Webber’s *Evita*. The performers’ different professional backgrounds –in acting (e.g., Glenn Close) or in singing (e.g., Valeria Lynch and Paloma San Basilio)– can be related to the complex duality of musicals’ characters –constantly moving from spoken text “into new versions of themselves, song-and-dance versions” (McMillin, 2006, 184), which implies that musical theatre performers also have a double presence on stage, as actors and singers. In the Spanish-language productions, Lynch and San Basilio contributed not just their artistry and experience but the lure of their association with popular and respected shows in the respective target contexts. The appeal Norma Desmond had for them was revealed in interviews in which they each described the character as “the role of

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10 As Paul St-Pierre once put it, “the translator must refer to certain standards in order to ascertain what will constitute an acceptable product for his or her readers, while at the same time being aware that what is considered acceptable is determined not by the text to be translated but by the context in which he or she is working” (1993, 246).

her life” (Nieto 2017; and Lizenberg 2018 –my translation). The male protagonist was also carefully cast in both versions: Gerónimo Rauch came to play Joe Gillis in Tenerife after having performed musicals like *The Miserables*, *Grease*, *Chicago*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, etc., not just in Spanish versions in Buenos Aires but in original language productions in the West End, while Mariano Chiesa also had previous experience in popular musicals in Argentina.

The care taken with the casting points to the significant *economic factors* and concerns which bear on the importation of musicals and were also examined in Mateo (2008). Indeed, as stated in that study, “it is much riskier in financial terms to import a theatre piece than a film,” among other reasons because “musical theatre [is] a very costly genre” (2008, 335, 336). We have had recent proof of this in the gradual reopening of theatres after the COVID-19 pandemic, when musicals and opera were the last to go back on stage in most capitals, certainly in New York and London. A recent article about this in *El País* stated, referring to Broadway musicals: “although some of the city’s stages resumed their activity in the summer, the most popular productions had to wait until [the end of September] for the curtain to rise, bringing New York’s cultural hub back to life and finally joining the steady re-opening of theatres and opera houses which has taken place around the world;” while, in Spain, “the new season opens with great expectations but also with wariness” (Sánchez-Vallejo et al, 2021 –my translation). The caution is due to the financial risk involved in producing a musical. On the one hand, “if it is good, a musical will not deceive in terms of what it promises to be: a visually beautiful and appealing show, spectacular sets and lighting, music and dance, besides the text” –Jaime Azpilicueta claimed in an interview five years before he translated and directed the first Spanish version of *Sunset Boulevard* (Larrauri 2012 –my translation); on the other hand, the many different agents involved in making all that possible –composer, librettist, songwriter, director, conductor, choreographer, performers, set and costume designers, various types of technicians, translators (in the case of musicals performed in a target context), etc.– explain why the cost is usually enormous. In fact, as musicals have become more spectacular and impressive in terms of quality, audiences’ expectations have risen accordingly and as a consequence they are more and more costly to produce (Azpilicueta in Larrauri 2012).<sup>11</sup>

Unsurprisingly, then, not many producers are keen to take the risk and even people as renowned as Andrew Lloyd-Webber have suffered huge losses –precisely

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11 In his article about Broadway after the pandemic, Allen referred to the tricky situation of the world of musicals: “While Broadway was thriving this time last year, the business suffered from systemic problems that had never really been addressed, such as bloated ticket prices and venal scalpers” (Allen 2020).

with *Sunset Boulevard*, as was mentioned in section 2. Indeed, the show has been described as a “hit-flop” (Allen 2020), for, despite running for more than two years in the last Broadway production, having earned substantial profits with both the London and New York shows, and the success struck with audiences by Normas like Betty Buckley’s, Elaine Page’s or Glenn Close’s, it never managed to recoup its enormous investment –not just because of the high running costs but also because of the above-mentioned legal problems with Patty Lepone and Faye Dunaway. And, from the perspective of target contexts, it was a hazardous enterprise too, which a reviewer of the Tenerife production described as “[...] a risk, posed by producing a musical that has achieved cult-like status and that, at first sight, might seem to address a very specific audience” (Padrón 2017b –my translation).

The Spanish production –which Azpilicueta and Paloma San Basilio had been ruminating on for over fifteen years– is said to have cost around half a million euros (Nieto 2017), considerably less than the costly 1997 production of *El hombre de la Mancha*. Indeed, the impresario Luis Ramírez, producer of that important production at the end of the last century, did not hesitate to invest 400 million pesetas (over 2 million euros) in it, “with no government support whatsoever” and “[aiming to] revamp Madrid’s theatre scene and accustom audiences to attending good musical productions” (Rodríguez del Álamo 1998 –my translation). *Sunset Boulevard* reflects a significant change in this regard: in Mateo (2008, 335), I observed the contrast between, on the one hand, *zarzuela* and opera seasons in Spain –often receiving financial aid from the national or local administrations– and musicals on the other, normally being associated to the private sector and getting no public funding; as mentioned above, Spain’s version of *Sunset Boulevard*, however, was the third musical by Andrew Lloyd-Webber produced, in a span of four years, by Tenerife’s regional government –financing “locally produced musicals, so as to develop an economic and industrial fabric around the cultural sector of the island” (Nieto 2017 –my translation). This can be interpreted as a symptom of the *social relevance* the genre has acquired in the country, which was another factor examined in Mateo (2008, 330-332) as operating in the importation and success of Anglophone musicals in Spain, since subsidies are a sign of a “society’s interest, manifested through its institutions” (Martí i Pérez 1995, in Mateo 2008, 332).

Moreover, the quote from Nieto (2017) above tellingly refers to “locally produced musicals,” something closely connected not just to social relevance but to another important aspect of Anglo-American musicals in Spanish theatres: the role of (theatre) translation in a target system’s *productive reception*, supplying the target context with a new repertoire and even fostering the creation of new productions and new pieces in its own language (Mateo 2008, 330-332, 338). Indeed, in the interview mentioned above, Jaime Azpilicueta agreed that the musical

had already taken root in Spain, which could now boast local creations as well as people qualified in the genre (Larrauri 2012). Production companies specialised in musicals have certainly been established in the country, such as LETSGO or La Coja Producciones, and it is generally agreed that “the quality of musicals is soaring, placing them on a par with what can be seen in Broadway or in London’s West End” (Padrón 2017a –my translation). In recent years, Spanish stages have shown an interesting variety of imported and autochthonous productions, which may be translations of (mainly Anglophone) musical librettos created abroad or original Spanish texts. Some of Spain’s original productions follow the trend of foreign shows which have been successful both abroad and in this country: for example, “jukebox musicals” (Kenrick 2008, 380), which are sure box-office hits and are based on pop/rock bands’ songs; they started with groups like Queen or ABBA, later inspiring shows based on Spanish ones like Mecano or the Duo Dinámico (see Mateo 2022 –forthcoming).

The two Spanish-language versions of *Sunset Boulevard* are local productions, an aspect highlighted by many reviews and articles announcing them,<sup>12</sup> no doubt in order to mark the difference with ‘corporate musicals’ which have dominated the world of musicals in the last few decades: megaproductions by Disney and other multinational corporations, which are exported very much like ‘franchises,’ so that only the verbal text is adapted –being translated into the new audiences’ language– but everything else –connected with the staging and performance– is tightly controlled by the source-context producers (Mateo 2008, 336-337). *Sunset Boulevard*’s productions in Spanish show traces of this too: despite having their own producers, directors, conductors, choreographers, and costume/sound/lighting designers, they had to have their casts approved –except for the main roles– by the original producers in London (Irazábal 2018), Lloyd-Webber’s The Really Useful Group Ltd., who are the holders of the musical’s licence. Copyright reasons also explain the above-mentioned transference of the title: as Julio Awad, conductor of the Spain’s performance, explains in an interview (Padrón 2017a), productions of the musical have to resemble the original movie by Billy Wilder –something which, incidentally, makes the dissociation between the Spanish titles of film and musical even more curious and contradictory. Thus, these two Spanish-language productions of *Sunset Boulevard* were separate shows, with their own productions and translations, but they shared significant features such as the title, the poster, Norma’s costumes and looks,<sup>13</sup> and various staging elements

12 See, for instance, the title of “*Sunset Boulevard*, un nuevo y esperado musical de producción propia y en castellano,” *Toda La Música* (2017), last accessed on November 9, 2021.

13 See, for instance (last accessed on November 9, 2021):

<https://www.love4musicals.com/2017/06/13/sunset-boulevard-espana-2018/>

–e.g., a minimalist stage which underscored the protagonist, the orchestra placed onstage, and projecting footage from Wilder’s film for some outdoor scenes, all of which also connected them closely to Lloyd Webber’s production.

So, although they are local productions, this association with the original musical show allows the target-language versions to be related to the West End and Broadway, which highlights their quality while also meeting audiences’ expectations; thus, in reviews and articles about the Argentinian version we can read that it is “worthy of Broadway” (MarcelaCoronel 2018 –my translation) and “a musical that Broadway could be jealous of” (La Butaca Web 2018 –my translation); while the production seen in Tenerife is also presented as an example of how Spain’s musicals are attaining the level of what can be seen in Broadway or London’s West End (Padrón 2017a).

Fulfilling audiences’ expectations is particularly important in a genre with highly expensive tickets, which musical theatre-goers seem nevertheless ready to pay, a situation which David Savran explains in this way: “[consumers] know they are getting a consumer-tested and familiar brand–satisfaction guaranteed by Disney or Dreamworks. The star power that used to be associated with writers, actors and directors has been displaced onto corporations, which are the true Broadway stars in the twenty-first century. They are the bestowers of identity, community, and the magical power of the franchise” (Savran 2011, 247). The author is referring here to corporate musicals and to the New York context, but the impact of this type of musical theatre has been enormous and can be felt elsewhere, both in audiences’ expectations regarding the quality of the genre in general and in theatre seasons’ revenues, where musicals clearly have a leading role not just in Anglophone source contexts but also in Spain. An example of the latter is provided by Disney’s *El Rey León*, which has just gone back on stage in Spain after the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, celebrating its 10th anniversary in Madrid in October 2021 and reaching its 4000th performance, with a total of five million theatregoers so far.

As Desblache puts it (2019, 82), “[i]n the twenty-first century, artistic production is increasingly driven by audiences’ responses,” and musicals provide a good example of this. Desblache borrows Alvin Toffler’s term “prosumers” (1980) to describe music audiences, “[who] do not only shape music to be viewed and heard, but determine how it travels, if and how it is adapted and, as far as lyrics are concerned, translated” (2019, 82). An interesting case in point is provided by a very recent Spanish stage production of a classic of the musical film genre, *Singing in the Rain*, which opened in Barcelona’s Teatre Tívoli in the autumn of 2021 (moving

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTcyNanEaEM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xbFUr16JzY>

to Madrid's Nuevo Apolo in September 2022). A locally produced show, this new production of *Cantando bajo la lluvia* offers a curious exception to the translation norm that has long prevailed for the musical genre in Spain, since some of the musical numbers –like the title song “Singin’ in the Rain”– have been transferred in the source language. The reason given for this by directors Àngel Llàcer and Manu Guix is that, while “those [songs] which make the plot move forward have to be translated so that audiences can understand it,” the most iconic ones have been preserved in their original English form, since “it wouldn’t make any sense to translate a song which has always been heard in a particular language” (in Solé Ingla 2022 –my translation). This decision illustrates, nevertheless, other factors which have been mentioned in this study as representative of the importation of Anglophone musicals into Spain, such as the impact of intertextuality on translation strategies: the original 1952 film reached Spanish cinema audiences in what Elena Di Giovanni termed *partial translation*, with “dialogues dubbed, songs left untranslated” (2008, 300-301), in two Spanish translations issued in 1953 and 1974 (subtitles being incorporated for the songs in later DVD versions). This has made the iconic title song –and others like “Good morning”– be known in Spain in the original English version, so audiences would probably dislike a Spanish performance of it onstage. The directors’ translation choice, therefore, shows the influence exerted by the connection with an original work already known in the target context as well as by commercial aspects. No surtitles were provided for the untranslated numbers, which created a bilingual effect not present in the original text –with performers switching from Spanish to English in the various musical numbers– and produced a similar type of reception to that of the 1953/1974 Spanish film versions, whose audiences must have received the musical numbers as mere ‘songs’ rather than as integral parts of the narrative.

Reviews are a good indicator of how audiences’ expectations influence translation decisions, revealing a clear preference for performance of foreign musicals in their own language (except in rare cases as the one just mentioned), at least in Spanish-language target contexts; notice, for instance, the title of an article about the Tenerife show: “*Sunset Boulevard*, a new long-awaited locally produced musical, and in Spanish” (Toda La Música 2017 –my translation); or how a reviewer of the Argentinian production highlights that it is “performed in Spanish and by Argentinians” (Lizenberg 2018 –my translation). Indeed, the latter author reveals how audiences also expect and value naturalness and familiarity from the text heard on stage: “the Spanish used by the performers strikes a good balance between *neutral Spanish* and that of the Buenos Aires’ *Porteño* variety, an eloquent register which sounds natural and pleasant” (my italics). This is achieved through the choice of *voseo* (instead of the *tú/usted* pronoun forms used for the 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular in peninsular Spanish) and Argentinian accentual patterns like “sabés, contás, alquilás, besás, etc.” –which

in turn facilitate the actors' performance in Buenos Aires— and through the use of idiomatic expressions and turns of phrase which make the text more natural. The impact of the local context on translation strategies is also seen in the adaptation or deletion of cultural references, a tricky issue in this musical with such close relationship with the original context. Naturalness and familiarity are in fact connected to the need for immediacy in (the translation of) musicals' lyrics and theatre texts in general, which have to 'touch' their audiences if they are to be effective (see, for instance, Frankel 2000, 121-125). The following extract from the title song will briefly illustrate some of these strategies:<sup>14</sup>

<i>Source text</i>	<i>Argentina's version</i>
Sure, I came out here to make my name wanted my pool, my dose of fame wanted my parking space at Warner's.	Sí, yo vine aquí para triunfar, hacerme un nombre y un lugar, Confíe en mi esfuerzo y en mi suerte.
But, after a year a one-room hell a Murphy bed a rancid smell wallpaper peeling at the corners.	Pero a más de un año que pasó, tengo una cama y un colchón en un lugar de mala muerte.
Sunset Boulevard, twisting boulevard secretive and rich, a little scary.	Sunset Boulevard, viejo boulevard lleno de ilusiones y de miedos.
Sunset Boulevard, tempting boulevard waiting there to swallow the unwary.	Sunset Boulevard, feroz boulevard listo a devorarse al entero mundo

*Sunset Boulevard* therefore gives relevant information related to the translation of musicals in terms of the process and of the final product too; for instance, about

14 Recordings or performances of both Spanish-language versions are available on the web, eg. [last accessed on November 9, 2021]:  
<https://www.love4musicals.com/2017/06/13/sunset-boulevard-espana-2018/index.html>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1cEAQXynWAQ>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHJIEvHVk7o>

the professionals in charge of the translation. In the same way as the adaptation of Billy Wilder's script for the original musical was commissioned by composer-producer Andrew Lloyd-Webber to leading playwright and adaptor Christopher Hampton and acclaimed lyricist Don Black, experienced translators of musicals took charge of the Spanish-language versions. Jaime Azpilicueta, director and translator of musicals, has become a real expert in the genre after a long and fruitful career, having been responsible (on his own or as co-translator) for the (successful) Spanish versions of musicals such as *Jesucristo Superstar*, *Evita*, *My Fair Lady*, *Cabaret* or *Víctor Victoria* in Spain, at times even having two productions directed and/or translated by him on stage at the same time –this was the case with *Sonrisas y lágrimas* (the Spanish *The Sound of Music*) and *My Fair Lady*, both seen in Bilbao in 2012 (Larrauri 2012). The Argentinians Fernando Masllorens and Federico González del Pino started collaborating together as theatre translators, adaptors, producers and impresarios in 1978, and have an endless list of translations or adaptations of plays and musicals together, among them Anglo-American pieces such as *Rent*, *Hairspray*, *The Producers*, *Sweeney Todd* or *Nine*. Finally, Elio Marchi, who was responsible for the songs' lyrics in the Argentinian version of *Sunset Boulevard*, is the director of the Maipo theatre, which staged the show, and has considerable experience both as a theatre director and as a translator.

Curiously, though, the translators' names are hardly ever mentioned in reviews and articles about the two Spanish-language productions. This is also the case even with the official presentation of each production, in which the "autoría y letras" or "Letra" and "Adaptación" are attributed only to the original librettist and lyricist, as if the Argentinian and Spanish audiences would actually be hearing Hampton and Black's text. Unfortunately, this invisibility of the role of theatre translators –which clearly affects those of musical plays too– is hardly uncommon, having in fact traditionally been the norm except when the translator/adaptor is a famous playwright in the target context (see Mateo 2002).

It should be mentioned here that the Argentinian translators' version received more favourable reviews, and comments from audiences, than the one seen in Spain: the show in Tenerife was said, for instance, to feature "uninspired adaptations of the original text" (Allwebber 2017 –my translation), while reviews of the target text heard in Buenos Aires generally praised its work of "adaptation" as, e.g., "successfully accomplished" and showing only subtle changes from the original (La Butaca Web, 2018 –my translation). Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that in theatre (translation), the verbal text is one more element –arguably the most important one– in the complex semiotic whole of the performance (see, for instance, Mateo 2002, 45-46, among the numerous studies by translation scholars dealing with this); in musicals, moreover, the verbal text competes with the music in creating the emotional and artistic impact and the overall effect.

#### 4. Conclusion

In today's context of consumers' preference for vocal music performed in English in many non-English contexts (Desblache 2019, 184-5) and for surtitling rather than sung translation in opera performances, musicals can claim to be a striking exception, since they are not only regularly translated but their audiences in fact expect to watch and hear them in their own language. Musicals are therefore a fine example of sung translation. These texts, moreover, are not just pieces of vocal music but performance texts, and the process of turning them into a new language is framed within audiovisual translation, which "is not only multimodal but is also shaped by a range of environmental factors: platforms used for dissemination, audiences targeted, and cultural expectations" (Desblache 2019, 167). In fact, the translation modality commonly chosen –and expected– for musicals in target contexts today highlights their performance component, placing them closer to spoken theatre than opera in terms of translation, since plays are also usually performed in the audience's language while operas, in many contexts like Spain, are normally heard in their original language –be it the audience's tongue or a foreign one.

When music forms part of the source and target texts' semiotic whole, theatre translation is made more complex, not just because the music component is added to the set of performance elements affecting the textual challenges faced by translators, but because it introduces a different set of expectations and conventions connected to the translation of (this specific genre of) musical texts. Whether and how a musical play is seen in a target context, in what language and through which translation mode, is linked to factors which relate both to their essence as musical *and* performance texts, and to the production and reception conditions prevailing in the new cultural, musical and theatrical system. The examination of the production and reception of *Sunset Boulevard* in Spanish translation has hopefully served to illustrate the relevance and variety of contextual factors in the importation of Anglophone musicals into Spain, as well as the dialogue established between texts and contexts in the translation process.

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