

# Play it again, Tim

by Murray Chandler

THE musical *Chess* is rapidly becoming a mega-hit on the London stage and it could be the greatest publicity boost for the game since Bobby Fischer. In addition to some outstanding music, with lyrics by Tim Rice (*Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Evita*) and Abba's Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus, the audience is given an insider's glimpse of a world title contest, its colourful personalities and remarkable incidents. One unenlightened critic complained that some happenings were too far-fetched, like the x-raying of the players' chairs for hostile devices. Having been present during the Karpov-Korchnoi matches in Baguio 1978 and Merano 1981, I can assure him that, if anything, the production down-played real life!

The plot of *Chess* is drawn from clearly recognisable origins. Soviet grandmaster Anatoly Sergievsky (played by Tommy Korberg) is challenging the temperamental America world champion Frederick Trumper (Murray Head) for his title in Merano, Italy. After winning, Sergievsky defects to the West, taking with him Trumper's girlfriend-second Florence Vassy (Elaine Page) — a Hungarian emigrée with a grudge against the Soviet Union. Outraged, the Soviet delegation use any dirty tricks available to get their new, robot-like challenger to win the next match in Bangkok, unthwarted even by the manic arbiter. These include bringing Sergievsky's wife Svetlana, who was left back in the USSR, to the match to tell him what a rough time the authorities are giving her. If Sergievsky will only throw the match and give Moscow the propaganda victory it needs, things will improve.

Dedicated world championship followers will recognise the mixture of real-life characters and events. The commercialistic Trumper is based on Bobby Fischer; Sergievsky has the scruples and charisma of Boris Spassky and the bad luck of ex-Soviet Viktor Korchnoi, who spent years campaigning for the release of his wife and son after defecting. The power-crazy arbiter (who very nearly steals the show) is open to interpretation, though one of his lines goes: "I control the match, I start it, I can call it off — Kasparov found that out." Florence could be Korchnoi's constant companion Petra Leeuwerik, a rabid anti-Soviet who spent time in a concentration camp. Korchnoi's wife never was in fact brought to Baguio, so we will never know if these two women would have burst into "I knew him so well" upon meeting.

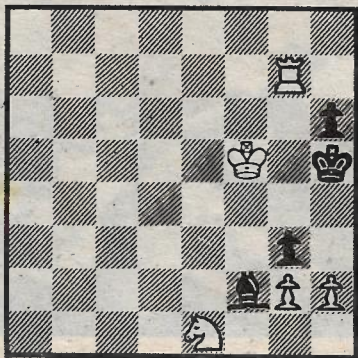
The appearance of *Chess* as an album, and now on stage, illustrates how one man's creative vision can produce something out of nothing (well, given the right contacts and several million pounds anyway). As long ago as 1981 Tim Rice was in Merano researching his concept. Whether even he at that stage envisaged the finished product — which includes a



"One night in Bangkok", a scene from *Chess*.

gyrating stage and hi-tech screens flashing chess moves — I don't know. But certainly he and his specialist chess adviser, Bill Hartston, have produced a show which accurately portrays a world even stranger than fiction.

I'd love to donate free *Chess* tickets for this week's chess puzzle solution, but (apart from it being in London) the show is booked out for three months. See if you can solve it anyway.



Composed by Sam Loyd, America's greatest puzzlist. According to Loyd in 1713 when Charles XII of Sweden was besieged by the Turks at his camp in Bender, the King often passed his time playing chess with one of his ministers. One day they reached the above position. Charles, playing White, announced mate in three moves. At that instant a bullet shattered the white knight. Unperturbed, Charles studied the board for a moment, smiled — and announced mate in four. No sooner had he said this than a second bullet removed the pawn on h2. Once again Charles considered his position — and announced mate in five! Solutions upside down below. ■

Puzzle Solutions:

1. Rh2 g×h2 5. g4 mate  
 1. Rb7 Be3 2. Rb1 Bg5 3. Rh1 ch Bh4 4.  
 4. g4 mate  
 1. h×g3 Be3 2. Rg4 Bg5 3. Rh4 ch B×h4  
 mate  
 1. R×g3 B×g3 2. Nf3 B moves 3. g4